

Redefining Social Movement: Utopianism and Popular Education in Buenos Aires

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to those *compañerxs* who have lived and died in the struggle for a better world. The attempt is what gives life its meaning.

Abstract

This dissertation is a case study of a *bachillerato popular* (people's high school) in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Founded in the wake of Argentina's 2001 crisis, the school is a secondary school completion project for adults operating under the umbrella of the "National Assembly," a large social movement that is structured non-hierarchically and uses consensus-based decision-making. Based on a year of feminist ethnographic fieldwork and supplemental in-depth interviews, the study analyzes daily life at the school to develop a better understanding of social movements more broadly. This dissertation contributes to the existing sociological literature on social movements in three important ways. First, I develop the concept of *utopian social movements*, a lens for analysis of movements that incorporates meaning-making and claims-making into a single framework (in strong contrast to the popular theoretical paradigm of contentious politics). The school struggles to improve the material conditions of participant activists, a majority of whom are marginalized across multiple axes of difference (i.e., race/nationality, class, and gender). At the same time it seeks to establish the conditions for what is here termed *dialogic freedom*, the idea of liberation as a condition of being that is dialogic, reflexive, dialectic, and processual. Dialogic freedom is practiced through critical pedagogy as well as a more broadly intellectual vision of politics, and the way it is intertwined at the people's high school with a daily and long-term struggle to achieve better housing, food, and living conditions is a hallmark of utopian social movements. Second, I show how the school accomplishes its goals by producing a *collective subject*, which is (re)produced through a combination of structural and affective elements in practice at the people's high school: non-hierarchy, consensus, *mística*, and *everyday collective effervescence*. The case of the people's high school highlights the centrality of affective practices to liberatory politics, including those movements which take material deprivation as their starting point. Finally, this research makes an important empirical contribution to existing knowledge about social movements by describing in rich ethnographic detail how the school's ambitious utopian project is carried out by the subaltern and under what conditions.

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**Chapter 1: Introduction – to the Project, to Utopian Social Movements, and to the
People’s High School**

DECEMBER 2001

On December 19 and 20, 2001, Argentines took to the streets in such numbers and with such force that multiple presidents were forced to resign. The protests, which sounded like people banging on pots to show their outrage, were heard around the world. At least, they were certainly heard around the activist world in the global north; I can remember hearing the story for the first time on the radio in early 2002. Argentines seemed to have accomplished on a larger than life scale what many of us in the global justice movement hardly dared hope for. Before long, the Argentine “revolution” would be enshrined in Naomi Klein’s documentary “The Take,” and a whole generation of U.S. activists would be planning their pilgrimages to meet the amazing Latin Americans who had single-handedly defeated the Washington Consensus, and succeeded with bold and improbable projects like forcibly taking back their workplaces in order to re-organize them as worker-owned cooperatives.

Of course, the reality is always much more complicated than the media image. With soaring poverty and unemployment, the protests were as much a demonstration of misery and desperation as they were “revolutionary.” Rampant hunger resulted in lootings, and in two days of intense mobilizations, 39 people were killed by police

repression.¹ Less than 20 years after the return to democracy, the society was in crisis by almost all measures.

Nonetheless, crisis is often the midwife of possibility and Argentina became the site of widespread experimentation with new kinds of social movements. The social movements that dominated the Argentine political landscape in late 2001 and throughout 2002 took many forms, including neighborhood assemblies, recovered factories, and barter clubs. One of the most common types was unemployed workers' movements or MTDs (*movimientos de trabajadorxs desocupadxs*²). The MTDs are large poor people's movements that are generally organized via neighborhoods and many began as groups of protestors picketing major roadways for some state relief from the massive unemployment rates of the late 1990s. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of MTDs still operating around Argentina (many around the outskirts of Buenos Aires), and most have claimed spaces for their projects by squatting in buildings and abandoned plots of land. MTDs often operate a range of mutual aid-style social programs as well as small cooperative businesses aimed at self-sufficiency. These projects include adult education programs (*bachilleratos populares*), cooperatively run bakeries, organic gardening, art classes for poor children, functioning as community centers, editorial collectives, and producing crafts or other small products for sale.

¹ See Barrientos and Isaía (2011) for an excellent description and chronology of the events of these two days.

² This and all other Spanish language terms are defined in the glossary at the end of the dissertation.

The people's high school of the MTD Barracas, part of the larger National Assembly,³ is one of the legacies of this movement. This work examines the experience of the people's high school as an example of what I call a utopian social movement, that is, a movement which defies most conventional sociological categories. Although my description of such movements as "global heroes" is tongue in cheek, I believe the people's high school has much to teach both activists and scholars about politics, liberation, and social change.

ORIGINS OF THIS PROJECT

A few years before coming to graduate school, I was an activist with a non-hierarchical, anarchist social movement. This movement ran a social center as well as several tangible media-centered projects. In total, there were about 250 people associated with the group, although the active membership was probably less than 50 people. In this space I was first introduced to consensus-based meetings and other anarchist principles of organization. In our small, local Midwestern movement we spent many hours debating the extent to which our community space was anti-racist, anti-sexist, and open to folks across class, racial, and other divides (we also worked hard to try to improve these aspects of the movement). Eventually my exit from the movement was precipitated by an inadequate response to domestic violence from within the group.

³ The MTD Barracas and the National Assembly are both pseudonyms for reasons of research confidentiality, as are the names of all individuals.

Although relationships within the project became very strained, I still developed extremely good friendships from my participation in this space. More importantly, I felt that I had been part of a meaningful and important community project. I felt that my participation in the project had been pivotal in a small way, and I felt that we had changed our community but more profoundly a change had been initiated within me. I knew that after this experience, my approach to movements and social change would forever be shaped by certain expectations governing ground-up social change projects: direct participation, the expectation that my voice counted fully and would not be simply voted down or overruled, collective development of ideas and direction, and radical attempts to build the society we wanted to be a part of while resisting the tendency to become an isolated, island-like community.

My experience was very similar to that described by Graeber in *Direct Action* (2009). Our assumptions and modes of organizing were similar, and we drew from the same activist roots and national trends. Like Graeber, I too attended a massive “anti-globalization” protest during the heyday of the global justice movement. Graeber describes organizing leading up to the Summit of the Americas in Quebec, while I drove down to Miami to oppose the Free Trade Area of the Americas in November 2003. And, like the activists Graeber describes, we too dabbled in the relationship between our political, community project, and the Zapatista revolution in Mexico. Nor were we alone; such projects not only sprouted up all over the U.S. in the early 2000s as part of the Battle in Seattle and the Global Justice Movement (also known as the anti-globalization

movement), but echoes of these ideas and experiences have been seen more recently in Occupy! movements (globally, but primarily, of course, in the U.S.).

Somewhere around this time, during my involvement with this group before graduate school, I became more aware of the movements that formed around the 2001 crisis in Argentina. This is perhaps unsurprising, since one of the hallmarks of the Global Justice Movement of that time was the transnational networks of activists that were beginning to form as a result of the diffusion of the internet and electronic communication (Keck and Sikkink 1998). I crossed paths a few times with Argentine activists; after seeing Graciela Monteagudo's touring puppet show in Miami, some activist friends from my group interviewed her and eventually went to Buenos Aires to spend a summer collaborating on film projects. As more such exchanges happened around me, I started to wonder if the post-2001 movements in Argentina represented an experience similar to my own in the Midwest. Eventually, I became particularly interested as I noticed that these movements were not driven by the middle class but rather by the poor (a difference that was seen by many of us as a major barrier to the meaningfulness of our Midwestern movement).

When I came to graduate school, I was searching for answers about my previous activist experiences. I wanted to know why that experience had been so meaningful to me, and I wondered in general about the possibilities of non-hierarchical movements. As my interest in Argentina grew, these questions expanded to include more consideration and engagement with difference. Perhaps by learning more about poor people's

movements in Argentina I could begin to untangle some of the issues we had debated in our small community space in the Midwest: does consensus privilege white and middle class ways of interacting? Were the very forms of organizing that I found so liberating the same aspects of the movement creating barriers to a broader community? Was our insistence on dialogue and debate creating subtle hierarchies of education or privileging racialized and classed modes of communication? I wanted to know if the model of a non-hierarchical movement like the one in which I participated could work in marginalized communities the way it worked with white middle-class activists. Many people suggested that it could not, but I wasn't so sure. I could say that I wanted to know if the subaltern could make decisions collectively, but it would be more accurate to say that I wanted to *show* that the subaltern *could* make decisions collectively.

CASE SELECTION

When I came to graduate school, I had interest in some of the ideas that are developed in this dissertation, and some idea that Argentina could be a good place to explore them. I went to Argentina for the first time in 2008 with a few names and email addresses gathered from activist friends, as well as colleagues in the university, and 10 days to see what I could learn. I contacted everyone I could find (in fact I emailed each contact individually without mentioning the others), and each time I met someone, I asked them who else I should talk to. I asked what these contacts knew about barter clubs, *piquetes*, recovered factories, or any similar post-2001 phenomena, and what they

knew about projects that were still around almost seven years after the crisis of December 2001. Even then, I was groping toward the concept of utopian social movements developed in this dissertation, trying to find a way to group together what I saw as similarly-oriented movements while finding that social theorists in Argentina tended to be interested exclusively in a particular organizational form. Most social scientists studied recovered factories *or* unemployed workers' movements *or* the *bachilleratos populares* and so on, but few were interested in the utopian spirit uniting a subset of each of these sectors. On the last day of that trip, after about 10 meetings, I had coffee with an activist academic (referred to me by one of his colleagues) who told me about a social movement known as the National Assembly.

I went to Argentina specifically looking for movements or projects that were using consensus, non-hierarchy, and were focusing their grassroots projects outside of or beyond the state. In other words, from the very beginning I was interested in social change projects outside of the purview of contentious politics (this idea is explained in the following chapter). It seemed to me that the possibility of success increases when movements avoid, short-circuit, or just ignore the state as a source of redistribution or increased liberation. I didn't see the state as a possible source of liberation.⁴ Rather, I was interested in Argentina because I was interested in movements that practiced

⁴ This doesn't necessarily mean that I had a firm position on movements' total autonomy from the state; instead I refer to movements where engagement with and response from the state are not the determinants of success. Those familiar with the Argentine context will know that movements' level of autonomy from the state has been a hotly contested issue, which is distinct from the one I refer to here.

egalitarianism and were building social change projects that weren't centered on the state as a site of change or as implementer of the projects.

The National Assembly, from what I heard at this meeting, met my criteria and interests perfectly. Furthermore, the *compañero* I met that day seemed himself politically in line with many of my own commitments and assumptions, strengthening my interest in the movement. Finally, our conversation about self-conscious engagement with hierarchies based on difference and especially gender within the movement was promising, as he explained the ways that women's participation was discussed and measures they were taking toward gender neutral language.

When I returned to Buenos Aires in 2009, I again contacted this *compañero* (we are still friends today, in fact). He took me to a National Assembly *formación* workshop similar to the ones described in detail in the Conclusion. Here for the first time I experienced the kissing, singing, *mate*, beautification of squatted (post)industrial space, and intellectual development that I argue are emblematic of the National Assembly's social change project. I was hooked.

In 2011 I returned to Buenos Aires with an 11-month fellowship and a prospectus in hand detailing my plan to conduct research in three fieldsites. Within the few preliminary cases I identified, I actually did end up doing fieldwork in two different MTDs for the entire year. Even within the National Assembly, I considered fieldwork in different sites. But the people's high school is the only one that I write about here. The major reason for this is my own positionality, my (feminist) understanding of

ethnography (developed below), and how all of this determined the roles I was able to play in each site. In short, the people's high school was the only fieldsite that offered me an authentic role as a participant activist.

As a middle class person (from the powerful seat of empire) interested in poor people's activism, finding such an activist role was more awkward than I had first realized. At one MTD, for example, I was very welcome at weekly work assignments, but my attachment to the work was different since I did not depend on attendance for a stipend from the government program Argentina Works (*Argentina Trabaja*). This proved to be more salient than I expected as other *compañeros* wondered what my interest was in making the long journey to the worksite, especially since many times there wasn't actually enough work to go around. I was unessential. I noticed, as the months went on, that I felt less connected to the work and less involved in the dynamics of the fieldsite. I was never able to shake the feeling that I was an outsider critically analyzing interactions and I was thus unsure that I would be able to make a fair analysis of other *compañeros'* behavior. (Note that I don't want to suggest here that the only ethnography one can do is participant observation or that such a fieldsite would have been invalid sociological research. My own method of doing ethnography at the school, however, relied upon my body and emotions as integral research instruments. Over time I noticed that my findings at the two sites were simply incomparable.)

In the end, this research is based at the people's high school described below because it was a place where I was able to participate in an authentic way as an activist,

alongside other educated/middle-class Argentines with similar political consciousness to my own. As a school with *compañero* teachers, there was an existing group within the movement that I could join (despite my different status as U.S. citizen and researcher). In addition to having an appropriate role, I was also (eventually) accepted as a *compañera* and was therefore able to experience the *compañerismo* which I describe throughout this work.

As I explained above, I came to this project deeply interested in how consensus-based organizing would or could work. I was especially interested in how this could be true among marginalized populations. I was interested in how the subaltern could perhaps learn to solve its own problems (or, more accurately, in better understanding how such solutions were already being implemented). What I found in Argentina was an emphasis on subjectivity (including culture, meaning-making, social relationships, and other aspects of what the literature often refers to as “identity-based” tactics [Polletta and Jasper 2001]) that coexisted with struggles for food, land, shelter, and other basic material aspects of life. These struggles were not only concurrent in the sense of simultaneity, but in fact deeply entwined with one another (a condition I call *utopian* throughout this dissertation). The case I explore here is therefore the opposite of the presumptive conditions of new social movements theory. In its most common formulation, the “identity-based” aspects of new social movements constitute a shift from the material emphasis of older social movement formations (like labor movements). This shift is consonant with the presumption of a “developed,” late capitalist society where

citizens' material well-being is already more or less established (Buechler 2011; Pichardo 1997). Instead, at the people's high school, the struggle to recognize each other as fully capable autonomous human beings is inseparable from the struggle for basic material well-being.

METHODS

This study uses ethnography and in-depth interviews from within the people's high school of the MTD Barracas in Buenos Aires. I conducted eleven months of intensive, full-time fieldwork from January to December 2011 as a teacher-activist (or *compañera* teacher) in the people's high school. This time period covered a full school year, from March to December. My research write-up is loosely based on the extended case method (Burawoy 1998), but as the above description shows, my research design was driven more by awareness of an interesting case than by interest in a particular theory (awareness of the case preceded awareness of the theory, in fact).

This project, like my activist life more generally, has been deeply inspired by feminist thought. Mohanty's (2003) vision of decolonial, anticapitalist, and eminently feminist social change is a vision that resounded with me when I first encountered it and continues to shape my hopes for this dissertation and what it can say. Feminism embodies, in 2014, not only an emphasis on gender but a focus on power, inequality, agency, resistance, and hierarchies based on difference (including gender but also race, nationality, class, ability, and sexuality). My approach to ethnography throughout this

project has been shaped by key feminist insights and principles which I highlight here because these have, in turn, determined the data and arguments that are and are not presented in the chapters which follow.

Very early in my graduate career I was introduced to Judith Stacey's (1998) short article, "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?" I daresay that my professor wishes she had never shown it to me, because it only encouraged my ethical quandaries and hesitations common to all new ethnographers, some of which inevitably must be left behind if we are ever to write anything. Stacey's piece is embedded within the debate at the time as academic feminism became institutionalized in Women's Studies departments in what specifically feminist methods would look like (Hesse-Biber et al. 2004; Lapovsky Kennedy and Beins 2005; Rosenberg and Howard 2008). In it, Stacey responds to the widespread assumption that feminist methods would be anti-positivist, and that qualitative fieldwork methods like ethnography, interviews, and life histories are more feminist ways to do research. Stacey argues that while such methods may be more feminist in the way they represent the experience of the subaltern and also embrace subjective, varied ideas of the truth, such methods are also much more intrusive and may in fact be more harmful on the ground. Her example, which is compelling, recounts the complex ways she became embedded in her participants' lives and the dangerous subjective truths of which she became aware. Ultimately, she felt she was faced with the dilemma of producing a sociological work which either a) promoted feminist analyses but betrayed the confidence of an individual participant (and by that time friend), or b)

keeping a participant's confidence at the risk of betraying a larger political and intellectual project. What has been seen cannot be unseen; as an ethnographer, although one can be clear about one's role as a researcher, such roles become messier than we can ever anticipate, leaving us with touchy and even dangerous data.

The piece sticks with me as a cautionary tale. Stacey is very persuasive in her scare story, and it is easy to see how ethnography within a social movement like the people's high school could replicate the ethical issues which she highlights. I would certainly not, for example, want to place *compañerxs* at risk of repression, or damage their relationships with one another. I resolved, then, to center the possibility of problems like Stacey encountered in my own methodology. One tenet, then, of a feminist ethnography is to make the (feminist) purpose clear at the outset—to oneself and to others—before such ethical dilemmas arise. In this case, the goal is to examine the possibilities for resistance and to learn something about how to construct such possibilities. The project here is one that must first and foremost be constructive.⁵

The feminist intellectual project also centers difference and the positionality of the researcher. My awareness of the keen power differences between myself and other activists (the power of my passport, my pale skin, my university diploma, my basic assumption that I will never go hungry nor die of a curable disease, and a thousand other things) and my attempt to highlight rather than dismiss such differences are rooted in feminist sensibilities. Awareness of such power dynamics also drove me to be very

⁵ As opposed to destructive.

Careful when gaining consent for my research, and feminist sensibilities again pushed me to accept when participants rejected my presence. I wanted my subjects to be as in control as possible of their own representation and involvement in the project and I didn't want to make decisions for them. A core feminist value is the ability of women to have control over themselves; this is true emotionally and intellectually as well as bodily. I see my approach as an ethnographer as feminist because I strove to respect that kind of integrity and autonomy. Refusing to push my way into meeting space is another reason why only one fieldsite is represented in this dissertation. Rather than attempting to cajole my way into the field, I often took a somewhat perverse pride in my "subjects'" clear resistance to my presence. I tended to agree more with the activists who were wary of my presence than with conventional ethnographic advice urging me to find ways around such resistance.

Of course, this approach also has limitations. It specifically forecloses certain research questions and avenues of inquiry. The feminist ethnographic approach I outline here does not encourage the researcher to go where the situation and interesting questions lead, as most good ethnographers do. Instead, it almost encourages the researcher to hang back and wait until they are sure that no sensitive (i.e. really juicy) data is likely to be discovered. Essentially I did not want to know anything I wasn't "supposed" to know. In my case, this means that the dissertation does not engage some of the more macro-level questions I was initially interested in about the workings of the larger National Assembly,

or the most critical questions about how consistently political principles are applied in daily practice at every level.

Some of my observations were also less systematic than I might have liked. In Chapter 6, for example, I highlight my lack of information about pedagogy and interaction in other teachers' classes. The feminist ethnographic approach cautioned me against trying to conduct a systematic audit of classrooms or appearing at the school in ways that seemed inauthentic as a participant or might objectify *compañerxs* as participants, and this has limited the conclusions I can draw.

It's also important to say here that I am not declaring myself a model of feminist ethnography. On the contrary, I suspect there were many times that I was sneaky and probably violated some of my own principles in the pursuit of a dissertation. But labeling my methodology is different from saying that I think the product rises to a particular ethical gold standard. The point is that I was guided by feminist principles in my decision-making throughout the research process. Even if at times I chose to ignore them, keeping these questions open as problematics, centering the kinds of dilemmas Stacey (1998) highlights even as I write this introduction is, I think, a feminist intellectual project.

As a feminist ethnographer, I was committed to my participation in the fieldsite. Certainly feminists aren't the only participant observers, but engagement at and with the fieldsite in my case comes from a sense of shared commitment to the political project and a rejection of the idea of a detached observer. For me, this is part of working with

participants and not speaking for anyone. Unlike many other examples of participant observation, I had a clear role and set of responsibilities as a participant. (I did not, for example, live in a village with participants without any interdependence, which is another model of participant observation.) When other activists made the decision to trust me, they did so on the basis of my participation as a *compañera* and my commitment to the movement as a *militante*.⁶

Finally, I have relied heavily on the feminist epistemological tradition of situated knowledges and experience. I think the way I have situated myself clearly in this respect and the kind of ethnography that I've written are reflective of that tradition. While I've made generalizations, I've based my argument in concrete experience and allowed for differing interpretations of that evidence. Perhaps the political commitments and dilemmas about representation that I describe are common to other insurgent traditions in the social sciences. I do not purport to argue that they aren't. I can only say that my sociological self is so intertwined with my intellectual development as a feminist that feminism is unquestionably the intellectual tradition from which I draw my perspective. I

⁶ The desire to participate across axes of difference can be very complicated. One evocative critique of this impulse comes from Luisa Valenzuela's novel, *El Mañana*. After escaping house arrest, the main character finds herself in a *villa miseria*, where she is quickly confronted by the *villa*'s elder and de facto mayor:

"Tourist? What tourist visit?" - the woman said, sincerely amazed.

"Sociological tourism, they call it. They even come from abroad, you wouldn't believe it, to see a *villa de emergencia*. They pay well for the tour and here in Villa Indemnity we respect them and we are ready to receive them and tell them about things, but, of course, on visitors' day. Every Thursday except holidays, at 6 in the evening, before those who were fortunate enough to do a few odd jobs or those that went to the roadblock return home. I invite you to return Thursday at the appropriate hour and join the group of tourists; we won't charge you in recognition of your courage. It's not just anyone who would have the resolve to get themselves all the way in here, like this, alone, in broad daylight." (Valenzuela 2010: 193)

can similarly say that I see qualitative differences in the questions and issues I raised in my own work (and especially the way I resolved such dilemmas) than I see in mainstream ethnographic sociology.

Given these various feminist commitments, I was determined to be an active participant at the school in addition to my role as a researcher. After some initial meetings and interactions with activists at the school, I found my role there as a social science co-teacher in the first year classroom. While I was initially hesitant about taking on such an overwhelming responsibility, as my fieldwork developed, I found my participation at my fieldsite to be more and more valuable. This was seen not only in the simple terms of making increasing access possible but also in terms of pushing and enriching the ways that I understand my research and especially my role as a researcher in the larger political and social change project. I owe my understanding of the transformative experience of the school to my own experience as a movement newcomer.

My role as a participant was as the co-teacher of first-year social sciences. (Co-teacher because each class was ideally taught by two teachers in an effort to de-centralize the teacher as authority or expert figure.) Of course this class was taught in Spanish and my decision to help teach it despite my lack of knowledge of 19th century Argentine history and my embarrassment at public speaking in Spanish was a crucial factor in my eventual acceptance by this anti-imperialist movement despite my nationality as a citizen of the US. Being in the first year classroom also shaped my analysis as I spent the most

time with a group of students who were learning about the school's utopian model for the first time.

I think it is important to mention explicitly that I am a non-native Spanish speaker, and that I am not Argentine, but rather a white North American. These pieces of my identity not only reflect how participants reacted to me, but also my own understanding of my role at the school. Awareness of this positionality has driven the way that I interacted with participants in the fieldsite as well as through my writing. At times I have abstained from judgment out of an awareness of both the power my judgment can hold and of the always raced and classed subjective basis from which it stems. This is true even in circumstances where I might not hesitate to judge members of dominant groups. I also make sense of and interpret words and actions as a cultural and linguistic outsider. As an outsider, I am more attuned to cultural rules and practices that may be less visible to insiders, while on the other hand I may find novelty in terminology that cultural insiders may find commonplace or less meaning-laden (for example my analysis of the usage of the *mística* in Chapter 7).

In addition to the ethnographic work, I also conducted 14 in-depth, loosely-structured interviews. The interviews lasted anywhere from one to three hours, and all of the interviewees were also participants in my fieldsite. Conducting these interviews with people I already knew and had a relationship with outside of the interview allowed me to ask in more depth about key events that occurred at the school, and to explore different

perspectives and assumptions about what the school does, how it does it, and why the activists are there.

Outside of this year of intensive fieldwork, I made shorter research trips to Buenos Aires in 2008, 2009, 2012 and 2013. In 2012 and 2013, I gained valuable information about the trajectory of the National Assembly included in the concluding chapter of the dissertation. Of similar importance was the opportunity these visits gave activists to ask about my analysis as it developed, and the chances they gave me to discuss my thoughts on the movement with others who experienced it. I have remained in touch with most participants, and my relationships with some people have spanned the six years and counting.

Finally, in this manuscript I often use “we” instead of “they.” This is an intentional decision, reflective of my participation with the movement as a teacher-activist as well as a researcher in the fieldsite. I unabashedly share the aims of the project at the people’s high school with participants and owe much of my understanding of politics, movements, and social change to the intellectual work being done there and in the National Assembly more broadly. The analytical concepts I develop here, however, are my own.

DEFINING UTOPIAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

I use the case of the MTD Barracas to propose an extension to social movement theory. Instead of arguing that the MTD Barracas is an “awkward movement”

(Armstrong and Bernstein 2008), I show how, while a few aspects of the movements are explained by the contentious politics framework described in Chapter 2, the majority of the movement's activity is neither directed at the state, nor "contentious" in any meaningful way. Like Armstrong and Bernstein's (2008) "multi-institutional approach" to politics and movements, I propose an analytic frame that can begin to capture a range of movements that seem to simply fall outside of contentious politics or political process models. Instead of multiple institutions, I am interested in multiple modes of understanding and creating social change. These movements are in many ways best understood by their generative efforts rather than through conflicts. Here I propose extending social movement theory with the concept of *utopian social movements*.

Utopian social movements is a conceptual framework—a lens of analysis—rather than something a movement either simply is or isn't. I explicate the concept more fully in the next chapter, but the core characteristics of utopian social movements are the following:

- radical, uncompromising projects
- transforming social and community relationships
- community self-sufficiency
- social change occurs in the present

Utopian social movements is an attempt to provide language to discuss movements that have much in common and, in fact, are mutually inspired. After the global wave of revolutionary movements in 2011, analysts are increasingly attempting to refer to this new (or newly popular) type of movements as a group, but so far no terminology has really stuck. "Occupy-type" movements is one among many monikers.

In my analysis, it is the utopian elements of these movements that makes them similar in type and yet different from many previous social movements. By describing the utopian characteristics of such movements, I hope to alleviate some of this problem with the concept of *utopian social movements*.

Furthermore, the people's high school, and my study of it, is situated in a particular context. The school exists in a time and place, and the people who constitute the institution draw on these particular cultural repertoires and structural conditions. Other movements which may be similar, like the Midwestern project I was involved in, the anarchists in *Direct Action*, or the 15M movement in Spain, cannot therefore be cookie cutter versions of the people's high school. They lack the same shared history, cultural repertoires, and, yes, political opportunities⁷. Nonetheless, these movements share tactics, political goals, and especially an orientation to social change. This is clear both from reading case histories of each movement, as well as looking at how movements communicate with and inspire each other. *Utopian social movements* is a way to emphasize these elements in common despite and across different historical circumstances and cultural contexts.⁸

THE PEOPLE'S HIGH SCHOOL OF THE MTD BARRACAS

In the years following 2001, it has become evident that a significant part of the

⁷ Political opportunity structure (McAdam 1982) is one of the most important variables in the structural and generalizable tradition of social movement research that I am writing against.

⁸ This approach is in contrast to Erik Olin Wright's approach in *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010), where the intention is to develop a universal model.

Argentine left has adopted a set of new ideas about changing the world in which process and immediate transfiguration are prized beyond revolutionary or political goals of past movements. These utopian ideals, accomplished through consensus-based decision-making, nonhierarchical modes of organizing, and discussions of counterpower versus taking power, constitute a fascinating case of how movements engage with making social change.

This dissertation centers on the people's high school of the MTD Barracas in Buenos Aires. The people's high school is a school for adults who either dropped out or never entered high school. It is one of about two dozen in the greater Buenos Aires area belonging to different movements and organizations. The people's high school is a secondary school for adults; it is a three-year program for adults to receive their high school diplomas run entirely by the social movement. Unlike GED programs in the U.S. or public-run adult secondary schools in Argentina, it's a full time program, five days a week for four hours, for three years. Classes are held Monday through Friday from 5:30 to 9:00 p.m., and each night of the week a different subject is taught. The subjects are Language and Communication, Mathematics, Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Cooperativism, which alternates weekly with skills workshops like foreign languages, construction, and computing. Every subject is taken together as a group by the first, second, or third year students, and each subject is taught by a different pair of teachers. For example on Monday nights there are three different language classes going on taught by a total of six teachers, and on Tuesday the three groups of students would remain

constant but six other teachers would be there to teach mathematics. Students in a given year take all of the curriculum (math, social sciences, natural sciences, language, cooperativism and workshops) instead of only the classes they need to complete their diploma, although depending on how much high school they have already completed they may start in the second or third year of the program. In 2011, there were about 150 students at the beginning of the school year.

In theory, the people's high school is not necessary. There are other adult high schools in the neighborhood that are run by the state. At the teacher recruitment session I attended as my first day of fieldwork at the school, another potential new teacher asked why the school was necessary given the existing public adult education system. One of the school's founding activists answered, saying that although the state was fulfilling this need on paper, the fact that students continued to seek out and attend this school implied that the people's high school is filling a gap left by the public system.

This school is one division of a larger self-proclaimed movement for social change. It is one project of a larger unemployed workers' movement, with many such projects based in the same neighborhood, in the same building, with overlapping activist participation. In addition to the school, the MTD is also made up of a cooperative, a soup kitchen, a women's space, and a youth space. In fact, "the" school is itself broken up into two different sites: the location in San Telmo and the location in Barracas. The San Telmo site was founded first, and the Barracas site was founded a few years later. Each school held its own decision-making assembly, with no higher overlapping assembly

although communication between both groups was ongoing. This communication was strongest among the teachers, who met together as a large group once a month while students mostly met together during special events because of difficulty and especially reluctance to travel between locations. Most of my fieldwork was based in the Barracas location since my social sciences class was at that location and I came to know the group of *compañero* students there better than I knew activists at the other location. Throughout most of this dissertation I mimic the practices of other *compañeros* and elide the difference between “the school” as the one where we spent our time in Barracas, and “the school” meaning both locations as one single educational project of the MTD Barracas, although this distinction arises again in Chapter 6 when I discuss pedagogy and evaluation.

This particular MTD, the MTD Barracas, is part of a larger national organization and network of MTDs and other projects (unlike many MTDs across Argentina which are stand-alone organizations). The National Assembly, as the larger umbrella organization, is characterized by a shared ideology among its constituent groups, which consist of MTDs, student groups, and other kinds of projects, like publishing collectives or other media groups. These groups are united by their similar political beliefs and especially their shared assumptions about social change, though it makes more sense to say these are diffused and developed across the organization in a back and forth process, rather than imposed from the top down. The relationship between the people’s high school and the National Assembly is shown in Figure 1.

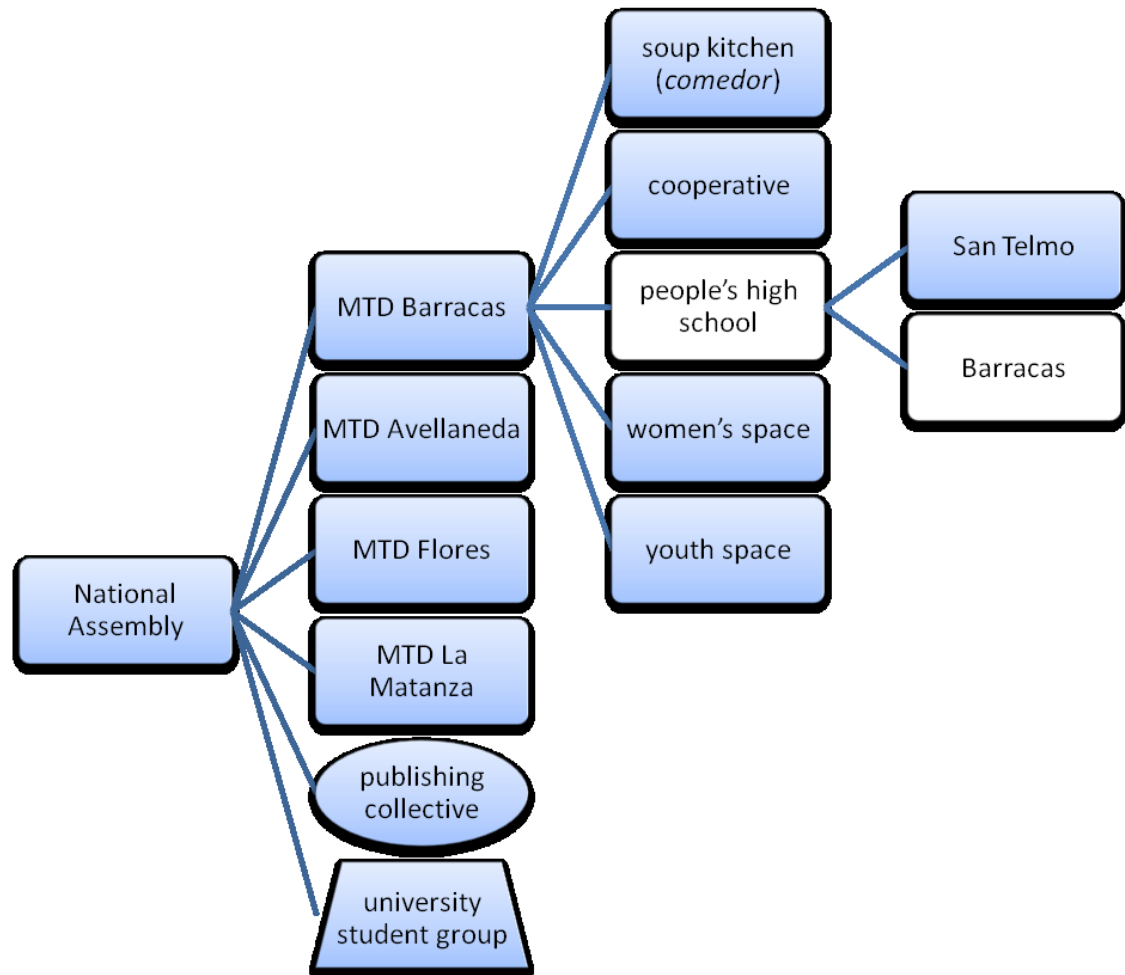


Figure 1. Relationship between the People's High School and the National Assembly.

The shared assumptions of the National Assembly are adherence to a modified version of horizontalism: making decisions in an assembly of equals, avoiding hierarchical leadership structures, and a rejection of contemporary electoral politics. The assemblies operate on consensus, meaning that no voting takes place but rather any issues or decisions are discussed until every person present is comfortable with the decision or course of action. In practice at the school, this means that instead of a director, the

highest authority at the school is the assembly, where teachers and students participate as equals.

Assemblies at the school are held every 15 days for two hours (during the second half of the class period). This is to ensure that assemblies rotate evenly among classes so that, for example, Language and Communication on Tuesday nights doesn't lose half of their class period repeatedly. All teachers and students are expected to attend the assembly, although in practice most teachers rarely attend and are generally excused from attendance. This is because while students have class five nights a week, and can therefore be expected to be at the assembly as they would be in class, teachers only have class one night a week. It is expected, therefore, that someone who teaches on Monday night may have a scheduling conflict for a Thursday night assembly. (This is especially true because the university students often have class on other nights of the week.)

Activists enter the MTD in a variety of ways. Some come to the soup kitchen to eat, begin working there, and then enroll in the school, while others make the opposite journey. Some activists come to the MTD because they are excited by its political vision, while others show up at the doors to enroll in the school knowing only that the school is less strict about paperwork than other schools in the neighborhood. Some teachers come to a recruitment meeting familiar with the National Assembly, while others show up to the first meeting interested only in helping educate the poor.

Women made up the overwhelming majority of students at the school, which is consistent with the larger MTD Barracas and characteristic of MTDs in general. At the

beginning of the 2011 school year, for example, in a class of about 40 students only 4 were male. The students were also overwhelmingly immigrants from neighboring Paraguay, with a few Bolivian students and a few native born Argentine students. Many of the Paraguayan students spoke some Guaraní (an indigenous language that is now the second official language of Paraguay), although most were also native Spanish speakers. In total, there were several hundred people involved in the MTD Barracas, and a few thousand participating in the National Assembly across Argentina.

All of the students except one or two lived in precarious conditions in the *villa miseria* (shantytown) neighboring the school. While some students lived in their own houses made of brick and mortar, others lived in shacks made of corrugated tin. The majority of students lived in cramped conditions shared with other families. Even those with their own homes, however, were subject to instability because of the informal, unregulated nature of life in the misery village where electricity is likely to be cut suddenly and sanitation problems are common. The lack of legal titles to the squatted land makes it difficult to enforce tenants' leases or ownership over houses once purchased, although it's also worth noting that the squatted neighborhood still seems very stable from a U.S. point of view, where people in similar economic circumstances would certainly be homeless in the shelter system or outright living on the street.

Most of the students were long-term unemployed, perhaps never having held—nor even experienced the possibility of holding—a job in the formal sector with minimum wage and other employment benefits. Most students found it difficult to locate

even temporary, part-time work in the informal sector. (I describe the neoliberal forces that create these conditions in more detail in Chapters 4 and 5.)

The teachers are also majority female, but by a much smaller ratio than the student body (or the larger MTD). They ranged in age from about 19 to 50, with most teachers between 20 and 35. Along with myself, there were a few other foreigners, yet they hailed from elsewhere in Latin America. A lot of the teachers were undergraduate university students, while another group were graduate students, and a few enrolled in graduate programs in education after becoming involved with the people's high school. Other people were professionals in related careers, especially teachers, social workers, and other public sector bureaucrats. The teachers are mostly but not exclusively middle class, and many of them are active in other spaces within the movement. Finally, a few teachers were graduates of the school itself.

Like most social worlds, the people's high school had a lot of its own language and norms. I have tried to preserve most of these in translation as best I can. One such example is the language used to refer to activists. In many cases, everyone was referred to by the egalitarian *compañero* or *compañera* (or its gender-neutral shorthand *compa*). This language is often appended to the terms teacher (*profe*) and student (*estudiante*) in order to balance their hierarchical connotations—*compañero profe* or *compañero estudiante*. I have mirrored this practice in English with the terms teacher-activist and student-activist. This usage at the school is far from consistent, and people are often referred to as simply either teacher or student. However, the self-conscious intention to

avoid these usually unproblematized terms is a demonstration of the movement's commitment to non-hierarchical structures in all spaces.

RACE/NATIONALITY, GENDER, AND ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Subalternity is unquestionably the norm at the school. *Compañero* students in particular were marginalized across multiple axes in relation to wider Argentine society. The most complicated of these axes in this context is race/nationality. Throughout the dissertation I use the term “race/nationality” and “raced” as a way of signifying the particular context of meaning-making and othering with regard to race, ethnicity, and nation in Argentina more broadly as well as at the people’s high school, even though these differences occur among people of the same “race.” As I noted above, a majority of the students at the people’s high school were non-native to Argentina, mostly from neighboring Paraguay. While this is of course a difference in *nationality*, I argue that in the Argentine context this difference is one that is also racialized. Historically, Argentina has imagined itself as a white nation, tied more to Europe than to the rest of Latin America (Kaminsky 2009; Sutton 2010). The indigenous ancestry of a large swath of the population has been ignored (particularly in Buenos Aires) in tandem with historical and contemporary violence against indigenous tribes existing within the borders of present-day Argentina (Aranda 2010). The common sense imaginary of Argentina is one of a nation that is either racially homogenous or where “race” per se is a non-issue, but despite its erasure, the presence of racial ideas is undeniable. Few if any of the

differences in question fit “race” in its colloquial U.S. sense, but there are clear processes of racialization and racial ideas (Omi and Winant 1994; McClintock 1995) at work in the interpretation of national and ethnic differences in Argentina. *Bolivian* (nationality), for example, is almost always understood to be synonymous with indigenous or *mestizo* identity, marked especially by appearance (race) or linguistic or cultural differences (ethnicity).

Another example is the word *negros* (blacks), which is used ubiquitously in Argentine speech to refer to the working/lower class (and sometimes one’s wife), and usually in contemporary speech is meant with affection or as a proud reclamation of working class identity. One *compañero* may say casually to another, for example, “¿*Che, negra, cómo andás?*” While the literal translation here is “Hey, black woman, what’s up?” the colloquial meaning is much closer to the use of race and blackness McClintock (1995) explores in Victorian descriptions of Irish and working class people. In this case, the *negra* in question would probably either be a working class woman with brown skin (two characteristics that are themselves tied up in the Argentine social imagination) or the kind of middle class woman (light- or dark-skinned) who is very comfortable with lower class slang.⁹

The people’s high school exists within these larger complex racial politics. It particularly attracted a largely subaltern population, including racialized others, in part because of its ability to meet the raced, classed, and gendered needs of students. One way

⁹ The use of *negra* to signify wife is somewhat different. In that case, it makes no particular implications about the race or class of the woman in question.

to understand the people's high school is as a grassroots development project to provide community-appropriate education where the state has failed to do so. On one level, the school's day to day functioning as a school was, in itself, a utopian political project. The people's high school is a clear example of a social movement attempting to meet a need traditionally thought of as the state's responsibility: free, accessible education. The school grew directly out of recognition that state-run public schools were not meeting the needs of movement members. It was founded several years after the MTD Barracas to which it belongs, as many movement members cited the lack of a high school diploma as a barrier to stable employment, and it represents a utopian effort to remedy this need directly and immediately.

And it did not take long before I saw that fact for myself. The school educates in ways that indicate an understanding of the raced, classed, and gendered needs of its students that goes well beyond the public system. During the work party I attended to build the second story of the school, I overheard several students coming to enroll. Many of the differences between this school and the public education system became immediately obvious. One woman came in with a baby, interested to learn that students with children of any age could bring them to school and leave them in the nursery, unlike in the public system. Another potential student was having trouble understanding what paperwork was required for school enrollment and how to obtain it. Not only did she receive a lot of friendly help from women helping with the registration, but she also

learned that this school was going to be more flexible about the paperwork than other schools.

As the school year began and I met the enrolled students, I realized that these were neither trivial nor uncommon concerns. Instead, both were symptoms of the marginalization of the people in the neighborhood as poor women migrants. Although the students' ages ranged from 15 to 60, most of them were between 15 and 23. With the exception of a handful of teens and two or three grandmothers, the students brought children with them to school each night. These children were cared for by another activist in the nursery during class, and the frequent interruptions for nursing or crying were accepted and dealt with as a reasonable accommodation, unlike in a more formal environment where the impossibility of such flexibility would have caused students to miss class entirely.

In the interviews I conducted with students, many of them repeatedly told me how an unexpected teen pregnancy was the primary reason they hadn't finished high school. They described teenaged rebellions that all seemed to end with the same words: "I ended up pregnant" ("*me quedé embarazada*"). Usually this was understood by the interviewee as the obvious end of the story, forcing me to clarify "Is that why you stopped going to school?" When I met them at the people's high school, many of these same women were in their early 20s with 2 or 3 children. Since their teens, they had not been without at least one very young child. In other words, at no point since their exit from the formal system could they have attended a night school that did not accommodate young children.

Furthermore, given the young age of their children, these women were frequently absent due to children's illnesses, pregnancy, or the many other unplanned emergencies that often arise in such households. The flexible attendance policy was another way the people's high school differed from the public system.

The need for childcare and flexibility emerges as a gendered problem that is intimately related to the lack of a secondary school education. Girls shut out of the public school system by accidental pregnancy become women shut out of the workforce by lack of education. As the responsibilities of child care fall disproportionately on their shoulders, they are again shut out of the public system. A crucial difference, then, between the people's high school and the formal public system is its gendered assessment of the community's needs.

Finding the paperwork to enroll was also an extremely common barrier. It too was related to the particular needs of the community in the *villa*, which was heavily populated by immigrants. Migration, in fact, made it difficult for students to turn in the required paperwork to enroll in school in multiple ways. First, it simply complicated their ability to obtain it. Unlike adults who last attended school in Buenos Aires, immigrants from Paraguay and Bolivia couldn't just go to their previous school and request their records.

This problem was compounded by the fact that educational requirements differ by country. Several students were enrolled in a primary school program supported by the MTD Barracas. Under this government program, a publicly-employed teacher came to the MTD site to teach primary school classes during the day, allowing adults to finish

their primary school education in the course of a few months. Some of these students were immigrants who had completed primary school in their native countries. However in Paraguay, for example, primary school is one year shorter than in Argentina, so they are not eligible to enroll in adult high school in Argentina until getting the additional primary school certification.

Finally, many of the students had not been able to attend high school in their native countries or had only been able to do so intermittently because of the same conditions that forced them to migrate. This was the case with Julia, who told me that the lack of free education in Paraguay (e.g., the fees for uniforms and other school attendance costs that are a standard part of structural adjustment policies) meant that she was unable to attend school.

The people's high school was so much more flexible than other neighborhood schools that students recruited friends who were having enrollment problems at other schools, telling them the lack of paperwork would be no problem at this school. We even heard from some potential students that the local public school had referred them to the MTD when it was determined they did not have the appropriate paperwork to enroll in the formal system. While such comments sometimes made activists doing the administrative work at the school cringe (since the people's high school did in fact need to meet certain enrollment documentation requirements as well), they also point to the ways that the public system was not flexible enough to meet the particular needs of the *villa's* adult learners.

The students at the people's high school were all, by definition, individuals who had been failed by the public education system in one way or another. In fact, the school saw itself self-consciously as a place that accommodated those marginalized in other systems, an ethos that was not about charity but rather intertwined with its political analysis of the failed status quo. This analysis—and the services provided—is one that is attentive to the particular marginalization by race/nationality, gender, and poverty experienced in education as well as in the wider society by the *compañerxs* of the people's high school. In Chapter 4, I explore this marginalization and the way students experience it further.

OVERVIEW OF THE DISSERTATION

In the first few pages of this chapter, I said that this research project was motivated by questions about whether consensus relies upon whiteness and other forms of privilege to work. This dissertation explores the experience of a *bachillerato popular* in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Part of a larger social movement, the people's high school represents an institution created and sustained primarily by poor people living on the literal and figurative margins of the city. The experience of the school shows clearly that consensus is not the exclusive domain of the white and privileged; quite to the contrary, the school, a program for adult high school completion, is a welcoming space which attracts a majority of women and immigrant students and caters to needs unmet by the public system. I offer insight into how the school manages to achieve its utopian ideals

in this cross-class and cross-“racial” atmosphere, without simply reproducing the hierarchies of the wider society.

Through participation in the school, people in subaltern positions succeed in coming together and creating transformative social change. Outside the bounds of what is traditionally thought of as politics, the students and teachers of the people’s high school work together at creating a non-hierarchical space with full participation in decisions and leadership. Through decision-making as well as social practices, they produce a “collective subject.” Participation in this collectivity becomes a touchstone experience which challenges the core tenets of neoliberalism, including individual responsibility for poverty and social and physical violence.

At the school education and politics not only come together, they cease to be different projects and are instead explored in overlapping ways. Critical pedagogy at the school seeks to develop the liberated thinkers that are an essential condition of freedom, particularly when students occupy subaltern positions like most of the activists at the school. Education at the school is an inherently political project, engaged in alongside forms of contentious politics like street protests aimed at making demands on the government. Politics at the school, however, go well beyond the limited definition of state-centered contentious politics.

Defining the production of the collective subject and the critical pedagogy practiced at the school themselves as political acts, this dissertation analyzes utopianism at the people’s high school. In Chapter 2, I develop the concept of “utopian social

movements” to capture the wider spirit and definition of collective action, politics, and social change embraced and practiced at the people’s high school.

Chapter 2: Utopian Social Movements as an Alternative to Contentious Politics:

Literature and Theoretical Contributions

This chapter outlines the theoretical contribution of the dissertation: the concept of utopian social movements. This idea is an extension of current definitions and ideas about social movements, applying theories of utopianism to social movements to show how these ideas create a particular class of movements that differ in important ways from the definition of contentious politics. In a nutshell, I argue that *utopian social movements* are those which reject the divide between “cultural” and “political” movement goals. In other words, I extend from two basic premises: first, that the social movements literature, by dividing movements into “new social movements” and “contentious politics,” is missing the more important essence of many movements (namely utopian social movements). The second premise is that the sociology of race, gender, and intersectionality has been extensive in its insights into the ways that gender and racial hierarchies continue to re-trench despite targeted interventions in both “cultural” and “political” realms.

The payoff, then, of this idea is broadening the possibilities for social change by applying broader definitions of power to social movements. Similarly, *utopian social movements* as an analytical framework opens the door for consideration of a broader spectrum of movement goals and analysis of what movements are actually accomplishing. This is both a) a more optimistic vision of the possibilities for social movements in a neoliberal world where cooptation of contentious politics is pervasive,

and b) more meaningful for thinking about the dynamics and possibilities for gendered and racialized social change.

In Chapter 1, I described how I came to graduate school looking for answers about my own experience. But in the academy, I soon encountered a problem; it didn't seem like much I read in the existing sociological literature described my experience. I knew the movement I had participated in was hardly the first movement of its kind, but none of the existing theories seemed helpful in understanding its meaning and effect.

Starting from my own experience and the radical idea of wanting to embody the ideal world as you work to construct it, I began thinking about utopianism.¹⁰ Here I review the relevant sociological literature, beginning with an exploration of the meaning of utopian. I review how different scholars have used and refined the term and tease out some of the differences. Beyond definitional issues, scholars have widely divergent ideas about the utility and function of utopianism itself.

UTOPIANISM

At the outset of her study of nineteenth and twentieth century utopian communities, Kanter (1972) defines utopia as the following:

the imaginary society in which humankind's deepest yearnings, noblest dreams, and highest aspirations come to fulfillment... utopia is held together by commitment rather than coercion, for in utopia what people want to do is the same as what they have to do; the interests of the individuals are congruent with the interests of the group;

¹⁰ Doug Hartmann deserves credit for the original suggestion to start reading about utopianism.

and personal growth and freedom entail responsibility for others.... Utopia, then, represents an ideal of the good, to contrast with the evils and ills of existing societies. The idea of utopia suggests a refuge from the troubles of this world as well as a hope for a better one. (P. 1)

While Kanter's definition is not specifically anti-capitalist, it's clear that the phrase "what people want to do is the same as what they have to do" contains a strong echo of perhaps the most famous image of Marxist utopia, where one can "hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, [and] criticize after dinner" (Marx 1978:160).

As the paradigmatic work on utopia in sociology, Kanter's study has spawned a tradition of research on utopianism and communes in sociology that follows her very closely by focusing on communes. Smith's (1996) survey of commune members in the 1990s is in many ways an update of Kanter's historical study and contemporary fieldwork on communes in the 1960s. McCord (1992) explores what has made kibbutzim, Mondragon, the Bruderhof, and Monteverde successful utopian experiments using a rubric of success very similar to Kanter's. Other research in this tradition on communes includes Holden and Schrock's (2007) symbolic interactionist perspective of social control in a therapeutic commune.

Moving beyond Kanter's definition of utopia, one of the first tensions we find is whether utopia is a fixed place or not. Couton and López (2009) argue that there is a distinction between utopia as a place and utopia as a process, claiming that while most theories of utopianism have a latent understanding of utopia as spatially static, movement has always been central to the idea of utopia. In other words, Couton and López make the

argument that while a utopia *can* refer to a group of people located in a single space and time, it needn't necessarily mean this. Instead, they claim that no-borders movements and other contemporary embraces of physical or technological mobility clearly exemplify utopian thinking even while they necessarily defy ideas of spatial stability in favor of movement.

Kanter's (1972) distinction between utopia and communes performs a similar purpose. While utopia represents an "ideal of the good," communes are concrete, and even "identifiable as an entity, having both *physical* and social boundaries" (p. 2, emphasis mine). For Kanter, utopia represents the ideal while communes represent the reality. This is the primary purpose of her definitional distinction, but the secondary effect is some agreement between her usage of utopia and Couton and López's insistence on utopia as something beyond a fixed community. Crossley (1999) agrees with Kanter that utopia is an ideal. He shies away from defining utopia directly in his examination of "working utopias" but instead offers simply that "utopias are generally defined, following Thomas More, as places 'which have no place', or perhaps more positively, as places which exist in the imagination" (p. 810). This loose definition is followed up, though, by a case study of some of the "occasional instances ... where these imaginative projects [have] achieve[d] some degree of concrete realization" (p. 810) as working utopias. While Crossley's working utopias have a lot in common with other authors' ideas about utopian social movements (e.g., Price, Nonini, and Fox Tree 2008), he describes utopia as something that by definition cannot happen. So Crossley's working utopias are by their

nature imperfect, unlike utopia itself. In a way, by juxtaposing imaginary and real characteristics, Crossley shares this assumption with Kanter. This is in contrast to definitions like Couton and López's (2009) which focus on processual utopia. We could perhaps restate this difference as a focus on *utopianism* rather than on *utopia* itself.

Crossley (1999) examines how two communities have become “working utopias” within the radical health movement in Britain. He shows that these working utopias embody, for activists, physical sites of pilgrimage and “proof” of the possibility and potential of activists’ ideology, both for themselves and for those outside the activist community. The use of “utopian” to describe the unachievable is, then, intimately related to the linkage between existing examples of idealized concepts, ideas, or theories, and utopia.

The Real Utopias Project, a series of conferences, working papers, and books led by Erik Olin Wright, would seem to concur with Crossley in that “real” is considered a juxtaposition with “utopia,” but also with scholars like Gordon (2004) and Kelley (2002) who make a case for the importance of maintaining the ability to dream utopian dreams. The project charts the existence of “working utopias” that can be considered utopian with regard to different realms of social life: democracy and governance (Cohen and Rogers 1995 and Fung and Wright 2003), the market (Roemer 1996; Bowles and Gintis 1999; and Ackerman, Alstott, and van Parijs 2006), and the family (Gornick and Meyers 2009). Wright’s own capstone work in the series, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (2010) identifies four paradigmatic real utopias. From the preface that accompanies each book of the

series, Wright describes the projects' goal of demonstrating the existence, and more importantly, sheer possibility, of these social alternatives. Wright's "real utopias" serve the purpose Crossley describes: to demonstrate to adherents of these alternatives and skeptics alike that such solutions to social problems exist. Furthermore, they serve the double purpose Crossley identifies, which is not only to serve as proof to adherents, but also to serve as lightning rods for critics and objects for debate of movement ideals.

But Couton and López (2009) don't just argue that utopias need not be physically locatable communities. They go further. They argue that the political power and essence of the concept of utopia lies not in the physical spatial community, what Kanter (1972) calls communes, but rather in the ability to imagine another kind of life, another way of being, another way of relating to one another. They argue that this is the notion of a processual utopia, and that it has more potential than the notion of spatial utopia, in part because of the tendency to associate spatial utopias with totalitarianism and despotism. For them utopia is not only most powerful "as an inspiration for envisioning alternative forms of sociability [rather] than as a blueprint for the structuring of a society" (pp. 112-13), but actually the "ability to construct and challenge utopian visions is paramount to democratic public debates" (p. 114).

Price, Nonini, and Fox Tree (2008) concur with Couton and López's claim that contemporary utopianism may most often present itself as an epistemology open to many possibilities and alternative ways of living rather than a despotic insistence on the one true way that is popularly associated with utopian communities of the past. Price et al.'s

argument centers around the concept of “grounded utopian movements,” a class of social movements that they argue have been excluded from the social movements literature but which can substantially strengthen that literature. They describe grounded utopian movements as “movements that do not aspire to gain political power within the modern state or to challenge capitalism—but whose internal identity-work transforms the lives of their members, and even the social setting around them, as they seek to bring about a more satisfying world” (p. 133) and offer the Rastafarian movement, the Ghost Dance movement in the U.S., and the Maya Movement of Guatemala as paradigms. Grounded utopian movements, according to Price and his co-authors, make “innovative use of cultural resources such as religious beliefs, the creation of new cultural formations and meanings, and the manifestation of culturally-embedded movement practices” (p. 128). They are utopian in that they “point to an ideal place,” but “grounded” because of their actual existence in reality, and especially the ways they are informed by non-imaginary people, places, and daily interactions. Here Price et al. clearly parallel Crossley; they juxtapose the term grounded against utopian, as Crossley does with “working,” and both papers generate a new term in order to make an intervention into the literature on social movements.

Couton and López’s critique against place-based ideas of utopia is clearly applicable to Price et al. and to Crossley, but I would argue that there is nothing in Price et al.’s analysis of grounded utopian movements beyond the basic definition of utopia given that actually contradicts Couton and López’s description of “processual” utopias.

On the other hand, Crossley's argument is based on a physical concept of utopia. For him, a working utopia is one aspect of a wider social movement. He does not state directly whether the surrounding movement should be considered utopian, but I would argue that a movement centered around working utopias such as the alternative mental health treatment communities Crossley describes would also fit within the definition of utopian as others, especially Price et al. and Couton and López, use it.

Price et al., however, offer another aspect of utopian social movements that goes relatively unmentioned by Crossley (1999), Couton and López (2009), or Kanter (1972). In their analysis of grounded utopian movements they not only stress these movements' non-state focus, but place racial oppression at the center of the movements' concerns, stating that grounded utopian movements' "visions of strong utopias have formed to counteract conditions of racist imperial oppression (e.g., slaughter, ethnocide, displacement), and have focused on group integrity and identity instead of on instrumental action with respect to states and capitalism" (p. 128).

The centrality of resisting racial oppression in this analysis of utopian movements highlights several characteristics of utopian movements as well as weaknesses in the existing social movements literature. Price et al.'s assertion first of all offers a rationale for why (grounded) utopian movements arise in this form by arguing that there is a relationship between a position of racial oppression and a non-state focused movement. While they do not flesh this out fully, this could be either because of the increased susceptibility of such groups to state repression, because of the decreased likelihood of

having their demands incorporated, or because of a unique (or at least different) set of needs and/or perspective on the goals of social movements. The former two reasons are consistent with the Piven and Cloward (1977) view of poor people's movements that there are few opportunities for making demands to the state in many sectors of society. The latter is consistent with some ideas from theories of racial justice, in particular the concept that one's standpoint as a racial minority in the social power structure generates, at least in part, a particular consciousness about how best to change society (e.g., Hill Collins 1991; Guinier and Torres 2002).

Finally, Price et al.'s placement of resistance to racism in the center of utopian concerns is a critique of the exclusion of these movements in mainstream new social movements (NSM) theory. They characterize NSM theory as wrongly privileging the social movements experiences of racial majorities and those living in imperial states. While this characterization may not apply to all NSM theory, Price et al.'s impression comes from the tendency for sociologists and political scientists to argue that "new" social movement formations are the result of postindustrial societies where post-materialist values have overtaken material needs in importance, thus leading to new forms of organization and claims-making that are more about identity and symbolic recognition than about the demands for the redistribution of material goods predicted in traditional Marxist theory (on post-materialism see Inglehart and Welzel 2005 and Berry 1999; on the "newness" of new social movements see Calhoun 1993). However, as Price et al. argue and as Kelley (2002) shows, utopian struggles for racial justice have (and

continue to) co-exist with economic and social systems at many levels of industrialization as well as dire material need in the utopian communities in question.

Taken together, these pieces of scholarship offer a strong, cohesive program for considering utopianism and some clear starting points for expansion of the social movements literature in sociology and the social sciences. From Couton and López (2009), we recognize that utopia need not always be a place, and from Crossley (1999) we can see that working utopias are simultaneously living proof that “another world is possible” and motivation for activists to keep working toward it. Price et al. (2008) emphasize that utopian movements are social movements despite their lack of engagement with the state and highlight much neglected themes of race and social status as related to forms of social movements, ideas that echo Kelley’s (2002) assertion that utopian thought has long been an essential component of struggles for racial justice in the U.S. And Kanter (1972) has laid a foundation for sociological work on utopianism by examining in a systemic and empirical way how utopian dreams are actually carried out and providing a historical disproof of the notion that utopias must, by definition, fail.

More philosophically, Mannheim (1985) defines utopia this way: “A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs” (p. 192). Central to this definition is the idea not only that utopianism carries ideas that are beyond its own historical situation, but also that the realization of these ideas must involve the transformation of an entire “existing historical reality” into one “more in accord with their own conceptions” (p. 195-96). For Mannheim, utopia is opposed to ideology; an

ideology can co-exist with incongruous social conditions (like his example of Christian brotherly love in a feudal system), while a utopia must transform society and succeed uncompromised or die trying.

Using Mannheim as one paradigm, Wallerstein (1986) defines utopia and its usefulness by outlining three historical phases of attitudes toward utopia that correspond to three eras of Marxian thought. The three conceptions of utopia are drawn from Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, Friedrich Engels's *Socialism: Scientific and Utopian*, and Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*. In Wallerstein's description, the essence of More's utopia was "the criticism of capitalist reality in the name of egalitarian ideals," which could be brought about by "legislated reform" (p. 1296), although More's utopia also, Wallerstein points out clearly, requires slaves to do the dirty work and mercenaries to do the dangerous work. While this form of utopianism is the one Engels so harshly critiqued in *Socialism*, it was also, according to Wallerstein, ironically the form of utopianism that most thrived in the first era of Marxism, the era of Marx himself.

Wallerstein outlines that Engels' critique of utopianism in *Socialism* was largely a reaction to More's vision. Engels' argued (according to Wallerstein) that utopia is a fundamentally bourgeois and Enlightenment idea. It was a class-bound ideology whose opposite, for Engels, was science. Engels' science too, though, had a utopian vision at its core. This utopianism "was expressed in the little described, but clearly presumed perfect, classless society that was located at the end of history, just over the horizon. One got there by walking there (even running there) in the here and now along the rational,

orderly, efficacious path that the party laid out” (Wallerstein 1986:1303). The utopianism of “science,” as Engels named it, prevailed in the second era of Marxism, the time of “orthodox Marxism” (ca 1840 – ca 1950).

Finally, Wallerstein describes Mannheim's idea of the socialist-communist utopia, the utopia that prevails today in the “era of a thousand Marxisms.” This is a “utopia in search of itself.” It “is efficacious and not a mere ideology” (Wallerstein 1986:1304), and, as Couton and López (2009) elaborate, is a utopianism that is “paramount to democratic public debates” (p. 114). In other words, Wallerstein describes contemporary utopianism as the Mannheimian openness to epistemology embraced by Price, Nonini and Fox Tree (2008) and Couton and López (2009), though he gives a more expansive sense of change and temporality to the concept. Wallerstein thus echoes Couton and López’s argument that while an “excessively ordered panoptic discursive construction” (Couton and López 2009:93) of utopia may have, at times, been burdened in the post-WWII era by the shadow of fascism, utopia itself nonetheless remains a useful concept. Making utopia work in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries requires an examination (such as the one Wallerstein provides) into aspects of utopianism that more readily lend themselves to contemporary attempts to explore, practically as well as figuratively, alternative models of society.

Gordon (2004), too, sees utopianism as absolutely necessary to democracy and any attempt at social change. Gordon expands on the idea that the most important aspect of utopia is encouraging openness to new ways of thinking and of modeling society. She

argues that we can't allow ourselves to think about social problems so structurally that we can no longer envision any alternatives, stating that “there is a delicate balance between understanding and conveying the magnitude and import of long-standing, patterned, and real abusive power systems, and believing in them” (p. 119). In essence, in order to find freedom we need some freedom to think about it. While we should not disregard the ways in which our behavior and thought is constrained by material and discursive power structures, neither should we stop ourselves from dreaming a way out of these structures, refusing to let go of the “balance between fate (or faith perhaps) and fatalism” (p. 120). For Gordon, it is utopianism that allows us to dream of these alternatives.

Gordon explores what utopianism can be, arguing that “the utopian is its own mode or form and it exists as more than a haunt. It exists in all those examples of the things we are and do that exceed or are not just expressions of what's dominant and dominating us... *It is the articulation of social movement in the general sense of the term: the ongoing building of an alternative civilization, with its own reason, its own home, and its own system of value*” (p. 129; emphasis mine). Note here that Gordon is certainly more interested in utopianism than in utopia itself as a concrete location or even a particular social experiment or arrangement. However, while she endorses a processual view of utopia, she nonetheless insists on the concreteness of this dream, holding that it is “more than a haunt”; while utopia is not a concrete reality or location, neither is it the shadowy knowledge Gordon described in *Ghostly Matters* (1997). Like Kelley (2002), Gordon attempts to reconcile the critical importance of the utopian dream with the often

disappointing utopian reality. Both authors argue that the importance of utopianism is in its ability to dream, to imagine, and to experiment, regardless of how we may measure the fruit of these dreams. But this importance is not merely semantic or discursive. Instead, the importance of the utopian dream is in its ability to inspire, and, as Gordon says, to exist with us in the present. “The utopian,” she says, “is not the future as some absolute break from the past and present, out there. It is in us, a way we conceive and live in the here and now” (p. 126).

Thus not only do we need utopianism in order to dream a way out of the bonds of our present, but we cannot hope to build a future without practicing utopianism in the “here and now.” Whether we seek a Marxist utopia by executing a series of rational steps, whether utopia is a More-ian desert island, or whether we seek a thousand utopias, we cannot hope to get there without shedding some of the habits of our present (or prematurely enacting the habits of our future). Mannheim, too, argued that “the complete disappearance of the utopian element from human thought and action would mean that human nature and human development would take on a totally new character. The disappearance of utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing” (1985:262-63). If utopianism is the transcendence and transformation of the contemporary order, as Mannheim says, then it follows that there may be no route other than utopianism to eradicate inequalities which define our very subjectivity. “Be the change you wish to see in the world,” as the Gandhi bumper sticker saying goes. But more than that, build the world you wish to see.

Utopianism, then, is both paradigmatically a social movement and totally distinct from all other movements. As Gordon (2004) and Kelley (2002) both argue directly, a vision of utopia is necessarily at the core of any social movement. For people to fight for change, they must have a dream of a better world. At the same time, as Mannheim (1985) argues, utopia is inherently uncompromisable, but compromise (especially with the surrounding environment) is in many ways innate to our idea of social movement experiences.

SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY

The sociology of social movements has developed several key theories and lines of thought to examine various facets of social movements. The most prominent of these are the resource mobilization paradigm (expounded by McCarthy and Zald 1977), contentious politics (e.g., McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), political process theory (e.g., McAdam 1982), new social movement theory (e.g., Gamson 1989), and framing theory (e.g. Benford and Snow's 2000 review). Additionally, other key topics in the subfield include protest repertoires (e.g., Tilly 1986), cycles of protest (Tarrow 1998), movement success (e.g., Giugni, McAdam, and Tilly 1999), emotional and cultural components to protest/movement activity (e.g., Gould 2009), collective identity (e.g., Polletta and Jasper 2001), oppositional consciousness (e.g., Mansbridge and Morris 2001), and multi-institutional politics (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008).

Like any subfield in sociology, the social movements subfield has a series of what Andrew Abbott (2004) calls “fractal” debates—ongoing debates, many of which are common to other subfields in the discipline. In the social movements literature, one of the most important fractals is the relative importance of structure versus culture (e.g., Goodwin and Jasper 2004; Rochon 1998). In addition, the shadow of the study of social movements in political science hangs heavily over the subfield. Important concepts from political science that, while not necessarily embraced by sociological scholars of social movements, often inflect sociological research in the subfield are pluralist theories (especially of U.S. politics) (e.g., Dahl 1961) and the collective action problem (e.g., Olson 1965; Ostrom 2007).

One of the most predominant, enduring, and hegemonic paradigms is resource mobilization theory. Resource mobilization theory begins with the contention that engaging in collective action is in fact a rational pursuit rather than a symptom of collective madness or social disorder, and engages directly with Olson’s (1965) rational choice theory of the free rider problem. Put simply, resource mobilization theory rewrites the central issues in the study of social movements around how the availability and deployment of resources affects movements’ achievement of their goals. Following McCarthy and Zald’s (1977) paper on the subject, this approach combines several theoretical breakthroughs: 1) it moves the study of social movements away from the study of individual social psychology and into a group-level analysis; 2) it attempts to formulate a coherent typology for the relative levels of organizations within the generic

term “social movements” (i.e., social movement organizations, social movement industries, and social movement sectors); 3) it reconceptualizes the reasons why individuals may join social movement organizations as a function of the resources an organization has to recruit them; 4) it does the same for attempting to more clearly predict success of movements; and, finally, 5) it argues that a fundamental goal of social movements is, in McCarthy and Zald’s terminology, to turn “nonadherents” into “adherents” and “adherents” into “constituents” (p. 1221).

Less a rejection of resource mobilization theory than a revision of it, political process theory argues that one important “resource” of social movements is the structural political opportunities available to them. Just as resource mobilization theory can in many ways be characterized as a reaction to individualist theories holding that no individual would act in the collective interest without appropriate incentive, political process theory is at least partially a reaction to pluralist theories that did not adequately problematize citizens’ (as individuals or in collectivities) interactions with representative democratic states. McAdam (1982) shows how political opportunity structures control the context in which movements operate. This control extends to the availability of resource, but more crucially, to the relative impact such resources are likely to have at a given time.

Similarly, framing theory can be seen as an enhancement to resource mobilization theory. Framing theory provides a crucial mechanism to resource mobilization theory; it argues that the way social movement organizations frame their issues—to constituents, adherents, nonadherents, elites, and other stakeholders—are a key predictor of success in

the goals that McCarthy and Zald (1977) outline. Framing theory as such, then, adds a meaning-making or cultural dimension to social movement theory at the micro-level, but does not fundamentally question wholly structural macro-level models of social movements and their goals.

Resource mobilization theory, political process theory, and framing theory could all be categorized as falling on the same side of the structure versus culture fractal. And despite the fact that resource mobilization theory and framing theory have conceptual room in their models for other types of political opponents and goals, as structural theories both are often used in ways that assume the state is the primary focus of movements' goals. Political process theory is both explicitly structural and makes the state a key focus of analysis.

The most recent development in this school of thought is the “contentious politics” approach. Contentious politics was defined by McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly as “episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants” (2001). The contentious politics paradigm was originally proposed as a unifying project to enable conversation across multiple fields of inquiry, giving common ground to scholars studying social movements, ethnic mobilizations, revolutions, and riots. Furthermore, McAdam et al. hoped that “contentious politics” would allow easier interdisciplinary collaboration, looking particularly toward political science.

I argue, however, that by limiting social movements to only those interactions in which the state is a claimant, the concept of “contentious politics” misses most of the MTD Barracas’ social change project. As Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) show forcefully, the contentious politics paradigm supposes a narrow and single faceted view of power that is insufficient for a range of different social movements. In particular, they argue, new theoretical developments in the study of gender, race, class, and other intersectional phenomena have followed a Foucauldian tradition in which power inheres in non-state institutions, and where culture and structure are not opposing paradigms but mutually constitutive. Contentious politics does not give scholars of social movements sufficient analytic leverage to deploy contemporary understandings of race and gender in the study of movements.

Spurred as much by differing approaches to the structure/culture debate as by empirical differences in social movements, new social movement theory’s primary innovation is to identify and theoretically treat movements which are not easily analyzed by resource mobilization, political process, or framing theory. These so-called new social movements are identity-based and have intangible goals like political inclusion or public recognition rather than (or in addition to) material achievements like policy outcomes or redistribution of goods. By emphasizing these characteristics of movements, new social movement theory is better equipped to analyze what Gamson (1989) characterizes as the noninstrumental and nonrational aspects of social movement activity. While both resource mobilization theory and new social movement theory are responses to earlier

theories characterizing collective action as essentially mass hysteria, Gamson argues that new social movement theory is less bound up with demonstrating the cost-benefit calculations that would impel rational actors to engage in social movement activity and more focused on understanding foci like group consciousness.

As alluded to in the earlier discussion of Price et al. (2008), a key component of new social movement theory is the middle-class make up of these movements. Specifically, new social movement theory argues that precisely what makes new social movements distinct is the lack of a working class base with redistributive politics (Pichardo 1997). This shift from a Marxist model where society's poor fight for an end to their own impoverishment to one where middle class people struggle within and against civil society for greater recognition and cultural change is the lynchpin to the "newness" of new social movement theory. The macrolevel theory holds that these movements develop in a particular historical time period—contemporary post-Fordism—because of their focus on what some have called "postmaterialist" values (e.g., Inglehart and Welzel 2005). In other words, the theory is that new social movements developed how and when they did because the Marxist class struggle was no longer relevant to large sectors of society. Calhoun's (1993) critique points out, however, that such "new" movements are in many ways more similar to movements of the nineteenth century than the large labor movements that succeeded them.

New social movement theory is both an extension of existing knowledge about social movements that allows us to treat a class of movements that were previously not

very well understood, as well as a new way of looking at social movements as a whole by emphasizing the importance of meaning-making, identity, and expression to movements' goals and aspirations. New social movement theory and resource mobilization theory are in many ways competing paradigms for analyzing social movements. Adherents to the resource mobilization paradigm sometimes argue that the aspects emphasized by new social movement theory can be better explained within the resource mobilization paradigm. A good example of this is Tarrow's (1989) idea of protest cycles—he argues that what NSM theorists refer to as a distinct class of movements is actually just one phase in the normal development cycle of a social movement.

Horizontalism in Argentina and its Global Cousins

In this section, I explore some previous work on utopian social movements in Argentina as well as a few other key works that, I argue, also fit into the category. In the following section I will elaborate more on the shared characteristics of these movements and more clearly articulate my vision of utopian social movements. Here my intention is instead to highlight the previous work that is already been done, albeit by other names.

Horizontalism (Sitrin 2006) is nearly all excerpts from interviews the author did with activists in post-2001 Argentina involved with non-hierarchical organizations. Horizontalism refers to the embrace of flat organizational structures and use of consensus-based decision-making. The book is loosely grouped according to several themes she heard in her interviews, and throughout it activists describe horizontalism as a

constant process; as Sitrin says, it is both an unattainable goal and a tool to use for building justice. Activists discuss how their own projects are organized and how decisions are made, but more importantly they discuss the theory and philosophy behind the practice of horizontalism, beginning the story almost always from the eruption of protests and organizations in 2001 and walking the reader through the processes of learning how to interact with others in a more just way, how to find and appropriate necessary resources, and how they have worked together to defend their organizations from state (and sometimes political party) intervention and repression.¹¹

There is some ambiguity, however, in Sitrin's account of the relative success of horizontalism in Argentina. Sitrin acknowledges one of horizontalism's major vulnerabilities in the realm of community organizing, which is its susceptibility to interference from traditional political parties (especially socialist or Marxist parties). The narratives throughout the work, however, give an overall optimistic picture, taken as they are from activists with continued involvement in horizontal movements. Sitrin's work therefore gives an extremely good description of how horizontalism is supposed to work, and the benefits it can bring to those happily involved, but the book gives a less satisfying picture of how one can expect horizontalism to continue in the future, its strengths and weaknesses, and perhaps most crucially, for whom it has not worked as well.

¹¹ It should be noted that within Argentina, horizontalism per se has come to imply a more specific political stance in the over ten years since 2001. By 2011, it was a term embraced only by movements that maintained strict autonomy from the state and rejected by other movements (including the MTD Barracas) that practiced some modified forms of non-hierarchical structure.

Polletta's book *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting* (2002) is a historical study of social movements in the U.S., with more pages spent on movements of the 1960s and 1970s. She traces consensus-based decision-making from Quakerism and the pacifist movements of the early twentieth century into the civil rights movement, the New Left, and the women's liberation movement. Throughout, she examines not only the ways the groups work, but also delves into thorny questions of success and, somewhat along the lines of Kanter (1972), what group norms and values yielded results of more or less longevity or satisfaction among former group members. Polletta has some advantage over Sitrin by focusing on historical movements. Like Kanter, she uses history to her advantage in determining success. While Polletta's definition of success is much more varied than Kanter's simple one of duration, she is nonetheless able to utilize not only participant hindsight in her interviews but also knowledge of how the political and cultural context of the United States did and did not change in the wake of each of these movements.

Another key work on this type of social movement is David Graeber's thick description of contemporary anarchism in the United States, *Direct Action* (2009). Graeber's anthropological description of an anarchist activist collective not only details the decision-making structures but also the goals, barriers, and culture of an affinity group in the run-up to a major global protest. In it, Graeber shows eloquently that the reasons that non-hierarchical organizing often doesn't work are external to the movement. Constraints like official registrations and paperwork require individual

ownership or responsibility, which can often lead to material responsibility as only one person is allowed to act on behalf of the group over and over.

For horizontal activists, one key root of injustice is the individual's lack of self-determination and the alienation of people from the products of their labor. This is a clearly Marxist and anti-capitalist analysis of inequality, based heavily in Marx's alienation of species-being. Thus horizontalism is a means to radically alter people's relationships with each other and allow each person to make their own decisions, taking full ownership of their lives and their labor (Holloway 2005).

"Horizontalism" is related to a larger group of movement phenomena. These movements are categorically similar to forms of collective action known variously as radical or direct democracy (e.g., Polletta 2002), anarchism (e.g., Sheehan 2003), direct action (Graeber 2009), autonomia (e.g., Grindon 2007; Gautney 2009), and zapatismo (e.g., Holloway 2005; Ross 2000). In fact, activists who work under all of these labels often engage directly in networks together. The key characteristics of horizontalism are consensus-based decision-making, a horizontal or non-hierarchical structure, and a general orientation toward the process of decision-making and movement-building rather than the outcome. Sitrin (2006), Polletta (2002), and Maeckelbergh (2009) refer to such movements as "prefigurative," noting that the movements' orientation toward the process of decision-making is meant to prefigure the alternative world that these movements are trying to build. Maeckelbergh (2009) offers a reflection on the meaning of prefigurative that also fits my own experience as an activist and as an ethnographer:

In my experience as an activist, practising prefiguration has meant always trying to make the processes we use to achieve our immediate goals an embodiment of our ultimate goals, so that there is no distinction between how we fight and what we fight for, at least not where the ultimate goal of a radically different society is concerned. In this sense, practicing prefigurative politics means removing the temporal distinction between the struggle in the present towards a goal in the future; instead, the struggle and the goal, the real and the ideal, become one in the present. Prefiguration is a practice through which movement actors create a conflation of their ends with their means. It is an enactment of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society. (P. 66-67)

Prefiguration is an important aspect of utopianism, meant to capture a particular outlook on social change. Where conventional social movements look toward a better future, utopian social movements look to create that future in the present. Thus, the uneasy fit between utopianism and conventional studies of social movements stems in part from the disruption to the timeline of organizing within given present conditions moving toward a more liberatory future. Though Polletta has reservations about the term (mainly that it implies a non-strategic nature), her analysis of conventional ideas about success in social movements versus success in radical democratic movements implies the same temporal shift. In other words, if in “traditional” social movements the main goal is to see a change accomplished in the future, then in utopian or prefigurative social movements the future is understood to be changed by making a shift in the present.

While Sitrin embraces the concept of prefiguration, however, Polletta challenges the categorization of participatory democracy as prefigurative. By focusing on the

prefigurative aspects of horizontalism, she argues, analysts risk ignoring the fact that there are instrumentally strategic benefits to deliberation. Instead, prefiguration is set up as the opposite pole of strategic politics, particularly in the absence of clear consideration of the meaning of success.

Utopian social movements in general, and horizontalism in particular, challenge the existing literature in the following two ways. First, contrary to the acceptance of a collective action problem in the social movements literature, horizontalism assumes that people are fundamentally cooperative. As Sitrin and Polletta both show, the major challenges to horizontal movements arise not at the outset—as in a free rider dilemma—but rather when the movements are confronted with non-cooperation. This is especially evident in Sitrin’s discussion of political party interference (also see Graeber 2009 for a discussion of a similar phenomenon in the U.S.). Second, horizontalism itself radically redefines success with its focus on the process rather than the outcome. Echoing the women’s movement’s consciousness-raising groups and focus on the constant re-evaluation of the personal and private spheres through the lens of feminism, horizontalism focuses more heavily on building an analysis of alienation and embedded inequality than on the outcome of such processes. Horizontalism clearly embraces a processual utopianism, and in doing so attempts to incorporate some of the post-structuralist insights of feminism, especially performativity.

THE PEOPLE'S HIGH SCHOOL AS A UTOPIAN SOCIAL MOVEMENT

As I stated in Chapter 1, this dissertation develops the concept of utopian social movements as a productive extension of the contentious politics paradigm which I have reviewed above. To restate, utopian social movements have four key characteristics which draw on earlier ideas of utopianism and which distinguish them from “contentious politics”: uncompromising projects; community self-sufficiency; transforming social relationships; and social change occurs in the present. Below I treat each of these characteristics in turn, placing each within the context of scholarship on utopianism and describing how each is implemented at the MTD Barracas.¹²

Radical and Uncompromising Projects

Among studies of utopianism, one that clearly exemplifies radical and uncompromising project is Kelley's (2003) study of black utopianism, *Freedom Dreams*. In it, Kelley argues that the radical and uncompromising nature of utopian ideas is a key inspiration for less radical social movement projects. Using examples of African American utopianism such as black nationalism and surrealism, Kelley claims that only

¹² Each of these characteristics has also been incorporated (individually) into the study of social movements. Radical and uncompromising projects appears, for example, in the literature as the “radical flank effect.” In more conventional movement theory, the role of community self-sufficiency is often understood to play the part of example. These communities are not, themselves, social change, but are seen as providing the learning grounds for alternate possibilities. The goal of transforming social relationships has been theorized as movements which expand what is legible as politics. Finally bringing social change into the present, of course, has been theorized as a prefigurative politics. The main idea, though, is that these characteristics have not appeared as a group the way that I am presenting them here. Instead, analysts have tended to attempt to incorporate specific utopian social movements into the literature based on one or another of these characteristics without capturing the way these movements are similar to each other and different from other kinds of social movements that I argue “utopianism” captures.

through the purity of utopia can we know what we are struggling for in any movement project. He ends the book by saying: “But unless we have the space to imagine and a vision of what it means to fully realize our humanity, all the protests and demonstrations in the world won’t bring about our liberation” (p. 198).

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, at the people’s high school decisions are made in assemblies that happen every 15 days. One of the most obvious examples of the people’s high school’s radical and uncompromising nature is its adherence to consensus-based decision-making within these assemblies. No decision can be made, in other words, unless every participant at the assembly is in agreement with it. A proposal, therefore, can be blocked by one person.

It’s important to clarify that consensus is not, however, a unanimous decision. It is better thought of as an active process where everyone at the assembly has the opportunity to speak up, voice concerns, shape the decision, and approve or reject any proposals (Maeckelbergh 2009; Graeber 2009; Polletta 2002). I describe this complex process and its philosophical underpinnings in much greater detail in Chapter 7. But for our purposes here, I want to emphasize the way that one person can block a decision if they feel strongly enough about it. This is uncompromising in the sense that the goal is to have full participation and consent of everyone in every decision, without resorting to majority rule.

Community Self-Sufficiency

The classic example of utopianism most associated with community self-sufficiency is communes (e.g., Smith 1996; Holden and Schrock 2007). The 1960s in the United States, for example, saw a movement of young people who attempted to move “off the grid” and establish self-sustaining, environmentally-friendly communities. Today there are still many “intentional communities” founded on more or less the same model.

At the MTD Barracas, many of the projects could be characterized as “service” projects. The movement, like many other neighborhood-based movements in Argentina, provided childcare, food, tutoring, education, and even jobs to many of its participants. An important distinction though, is that these projects were not so much provided *to* participants, but rather constructed and sustained by many of the same activists who were also “receiving” these services. The movement focused on the community’s ability to solve its own problems. The people’s high school was established by the existing MTD in 2008 as a solution to the lack of high school diplomas among activists already involved as well as those in the neighborhood more broadly.

The school does have a relationship with the state, but that relationship is vastly more complicated than one of simple contention. Although the school’s diplomas are now recognized by the government as valid certificates of secondary education and the school even receives some modest public funding, the school was founded and run for its first several years on the basis of movement initiative alone. Even now, the state has very

little oversight as to the actual process or content of education that takes place (that authority rests with the assembly and thus with the students and teachers themselves).¹³

Using the contentious politics paradigm, scholars might emphasize state involvement and see the school's establishment as a temporary bargaining chip to force more government intervention; however, my fieldwork found something quite different. It was only once the institution had already been created—once the community had begun the process of educating itself—that activists took the next step of challenging the state. And they did not challenge the state with the goal of forcing increased government involvement in their education. Instead, they challenged the state to recognize their authority to educate themselves, asking for recognition of diplomas with no oversight of teachers or curriculum. An emphasis on utopian social movements emphasizes the meaning of an autonomous, community-run space.

Social Relationships

Classically when we think of utopianism and transforming social relationships,

¹³ Many of the school's links to the state are mediated by a coalition formed with activists from other *bachilleratos populares* around the city of Buenos Aires. Though many of the schools were part of distinct movements—some of these were part of NGOs while many were part of recovered factories—the schools also worked together to further their common interests. Throughout 2010 and 2011 this coalition of activists fought for the city and provincial governments to support the schools in various ways. One of the most important of these was recognition of the diplomas granted by the school, so that graduates were able to present themselves as high school graduates to both employers as well as tertiary educational institutions. Another, less supported by the people's high school of the MTD Barracas, was to insist that teachers at the people's high school receive salaries for their work. To the activists from the MTD Barracas, however, it was non-negotiable as to whether the school would give the city the power of approval over teachers in exchange for these salaries. Rather, in the spirit of the popular 2001 slogan "everything for everyone" (*todo para todos*), activists demanded that the state both officially recognize and support their work, but without ceding their autonomy.

we think of religious communities like the Shakers or other morally-based intentional communities. In sociology, the paradigmatic work on this is Kanter's *Commitment and Community* (1972), which examines how the Shakers and 29 other nineteenth century utopian communities managed relationships among community members in their isolated communities. Kanter's work describes how relationships were different from those outside the community, both by design (part of the community's reason for living apart) as well as by necessity for survival in a closed social space.

When I conducted interviews with student-activists at the people's high school, one theme that came up consistently was the idea that what people found most special about the school is that "people are nice to you here." One woman from Bolivia, Juana, told me about how she came to the school:

First, I went to see. I went to see how it was, if I could bring the kids, etc. Because I didn't want to leave my kids, because I didn't want my daughter to be alone. And to see if it was a little bit outside the neighborhood, right? To not always be there, inside [the *villa*]... And well, when I came and all this.... Well, all of the *compañeros* don't talk to you, at first, right? Because they don't know you. They don't know if someone feels like talking, if they don't feel like talking, if they like to make jokes, or not. No one knows. But the teachers do. They greet you, they ask after you. More than anything, I liked how they would like ask me if everything was ok, you know? So that, and then the kids could come, and be here. And me too. That's what you could say I liked.

This theme, "I liked how they would ask me if everything was ok," was repeated time and again throughout my interviews with student-activists. For people living literally on the margins of society, the fact of being cared about by others was a political revelation. Although here Juana emphasizes that it is the teachers who care, other students

emphasized the care and respect between students, or between activists in general. Ana, when asked about whether or not she likes the school and what it meant to her, had this to say:

Yeah, I like the school plenty. Plenty, because it's easy, as I told you. I can also help my *compañeros* that don't understand, that don't know, and they can also help me. I feel pleased because I could help a *compañero*. I like the *compañerismo* too, more than anything, because I made a lot of friends here. So... it's really beautiful, this school.

(Meg: What does *compañerismo* mean to you?)

In other words, *compañerismo* is like this: she tells me her problems, and I can tell her mine. We drink a *mate*, as if we had known each other for years, but no. It's very beautiful. You can also tell your *compañero* your problems, and the same *compañero* will help you.

(Meg: And how do you feel in the assemblies, for example?)

In the assemblies I feel good. I don't speak much, but I like it. A lot. Because for me, if I don't like something that happened, well, the hour of the assembly comes and I can say so. Like that. It's good. Or, we collaborate among everyone, like this thing for the scholarships¹⁴, because it's to our own benefit.

This is both a simple and profound point - what activists found most inspiring about being at the school is the warmth and respect with which people treated each other.

Affection for one another as comrades was something self-consciously cultivated and encouraged through a variety of practices within the movement as an integral part of the social change project (this will be explored in more detail later, especially in Chapter 6).

The people's high school produced a community of trust, respect, and cooperation in the lives of some of neoliberal capitalism's most marginalized subjects, focusing on changing

¹⁴ This is a reference to the cooperative contribution fund established at the assembly described in Chapter 3.

the ways people relate to one another as much, if not more than, their political relationships.

Social Change in the Present

Utopianism is often referred to as being interested in the means rather than the ends of its actions. Utopians are thought to be the opposite of Machiavellian—not only do the ends not justify the means, but the ends actually do not matter at all. The idea is that if the practice is just, then that is already enough, no matter what else happens. Social change, however, is usually something that social movement actors aim for in the future, as a result of actions that they are taking in the present. Utopianism shifts this object into the present, so that change is happening simultaneously with and through the action.

The popular education practiced at the people's high school exemplifies this idea of social change, where education is a transformative process in itself, a process in which the student experiences liberation through the collective examination of their own life circumstances. This idea is explored in much greater detail in Chapter 6 and the Conclusion, but the idea is that the (educational) process is the liberation. The people's high school itself is an example of this model of social change. While only a minority of students will eventually receive diplomas for their studies, the greater impact of the school is the experience of belonging to it (either as student or as teacher).

Toward a Theory of Utopian Social Movements

In this chapter, I have laid out a case for the concept of utopian social movements. My examples have not been exhaustive—throughout the rest of the dissertation these ideas and especially examples are developed in more detail. I am proposing another conceptual tool for understanding collective projects for social change (or aspects of these projects) that are not state-oriented, internally focused, and centrally interested in community building. I am not arguing that utopian social movements should supplant the idea of contentious politics or the political process paradigm, but instead I am arguing that a broader range of concepts to understand a broader range of not only “social movement organizations” but also the varied and layered practices, goals, and meaning-making that occurs within these organizations.

Utopian social movements are not “apolitical” nor are they purely cultural. The argument between “political sociologists” and “sociologists of culture” is by now a very outdated one; as Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) demonstrate eloquently, in other areas of the discipline, culture and politics are seen as deeply intertwined and mutually constitutive processes. This is especially true in studies of race, class, and gender, where scholars have acknowledged for some time that the process of social construction itself takes place across multiple institutions and is multi-directional.

Chapter 3: At the People's High School

As a social sciences teacher, I teach at the people's high school every Wednesday evening. Most weeks I spend Wednesday afternoon looking for lesson material, making photocopies, and thinking of creative active learning exercises, before it's time to leave home and go to the people's high school. This particular Wednesday (May 4) is a big day, because I have decided to go ahead and teach the class on my own even though my co-teacher, Romina, is unable to come to class. A university student, Romina is becoming overwhelmed by her own scholarly responsibilities and has to miss in order to study for an exam. After many, many email exchanges between last Wednesday's class and today, I have made a lesson plan that I feel confident with on my own (given my sometimes shaky language skills) and I'm going ahead with it even though we'd hoped that Laura, one of the language teachers and an experienced activist, would be able to come help me with the class.

When I leave, I'm taking a pile of photocopies for the students, and I'm also lugging my laptop and a portable amplifier, in case there are problems with the projector. My partner has been helping me at home by downloading and converting the videos I want to show, since there is no internet access at the school.

I put on some moderately beat up jeans, and an activist t-shirt if I have one clean. I put on my hoodie (the same one I always wear), and make sure I have some warm clothing with me because the classroom gets pretty cold into the evening. I grab the

backpack I take everywhere, kiss my partner goodbye, and walk out the door of my San Telmo apartment. It is a little after 4 on a Wednesday in Buenos Aires.

I walk the 7 or so blocks to catch the number 70 bus. As usual, there are several students from the private school around the corner waiting for the bus in their uniforms and red sweaters. As usual, at least one harried mother gives up on the 70 and hails a cab with her child. After about 10 minutes, a 70 arrives and it is packed to the gills. Standing room is already so crowded that there are passengers practically falling out of the front door, but somehow the 8 or so of us manage to cram ourselves on, with me standing against the rail by the windshield next to the driver. Somewhere along the route, another 70 passes us, with plenty of seats and making better time than us.

Today although the bus is crowded, it is pretty calm. Not like that time the man (probably intoxicated or mentally unstable) harassed a female passenger until she hit him, and the man kept yelling and harassing the driver and everyone else for another 15 minutes from further back on the bus. It's no wonder this bus is so crowded, though; within Buenos Aires' dense bus network, only a few bus lines go near the school and the nearby *villa miseria* that holds 31,066 of Buenos Aires' poorest residents (Bozzola et al. 2013).

The bus travels through La Boca, and snakes its way into Barracas. The large plaza comes in to view, and I start maneuvering within the crowd to make sure I'll be able to get off the bus the stop after next. By this time I've managed to move further back on the bus, but I'm still crammed pretty tightly between other standing passengers. I see

the cathedral, and as soon as we pass it I push the button to request a stop. I get off the bus at a busy intersection full of street vendors, and walk a few blocks down the residential street. I arrive in front of the movement building, with its enclosed front patio where my class is held amidst the noise of the street and the echoes of the kids in the playroom next door. The unfinished second story still sits atop the plain, cement block building. The same dog as always startles me by suddenly barking viciously and pushing its nose to the crack of a wall on the sidewalk from inside a house as I walk past. (“It’s like a horror movie or something,” says Mari as we walk past the dog on the way home one night.) I can’t see the dog, but it sounds close, and I walk in the street instead of on the sidewalk just to avoid it.

INSIDE THE SCHOOL

When I arrive, it’s a few minutes after 5 o’clock. Inside, the three sisters (“the girls,” as we all seemed to call them) are already here, and are seated at “their” table. I kiss Josefina on her thin, reluctant cheek, and ask her how she is and she answers without looking at me but instead looks at her sisters. Her sister Ana is much friendlier and smiles when she greets me though she doesn’t say much ever. Sara is as shy as ever, and it’s hard to get to her cheek with her situated in the middle of the table near the wall. All three are young; Josefina and Sara are 16 and 17. Ana is only slightly older, but seems much more grown up since she is married with two children.

“The girls,” as usual, have not lowered the benches or chairs for any table other than their own. The classroom is set up with four rectangular tables with a mixture of benches and chairs, put up every night for sweeping, and three to six students sit at each table. Most students sit at the same table every week and form cliques with their tablemates, though a few students pride themselves on their ability to move around. I look around the classroom, as the girls go back to their conversation. I put my things down and start to lower benches and chairs from the other tables, and as other students arrive they give me a hand with the task.

The girls are not the only ones who don’t set the room up for everyone; if for some reason they aren’t there or aren’t there first, other students might be sitting at “their” own tables, even leaving the bench up on the other side of the table. I guess it makes some sense because from the girls’ perspective, they shouldn’t have to do more work than everyone else to set up the classroom every week just because they are responsible enough to get there on time. On the other hand, the point is to share and collaborate with other classmates, and support the classroom as a whole rather than just look out for oneself and one’s friends, and it is frustrating as a teacher to come in every week and try to set the example of setting up the classroom and have it ignored. We’ve discussed this multiple times at the school assembly, but although it seems simple enough to make a rotating list of responsibilities when we’re all together, things often revert back the following day, as if the collective agreement had never been made.

I barely knew Laura, a blonde *militante* in her mid-twenties, when I first learned from her not to let this seemingly selfish behavior bother me. One Monday night I was at the school, quietly crammed onto a bench in the corner, waiting for the assembly to start with several students. I had greeted the few students who were near me with a peck on the cheek when I came in. As a white North American, I often felt shy about how I should greet other activists when I arrived at the school. Although I deeply appreciated the warmth with which we treated each other at the school, as a new activist it was sometimes hard to break out of a deeply ingrained reluctance to hug others because I was worried that they did not actually welcome my physical show of affection. In other words, I sometimes did not go out of my way to kiss and greet everyone warmly not because I didn't want to kiss them, but because I had trouble trusting that they wanted me to kiss them.

Added to this was the grumpy mood in the room. Many students felt the assembly was a waste of time, and since this resentment for being in the cold, crowded porch was audible, other activists resented their resentment and began to grumble themselves.

Laura, by contrast, came in full of energy and warmth, and enthusiastically hugged and kissed everyone she encountered, rubbing the women's backs and asking them how they were. Students responded with a big smile when they saw her, and chatted with her. She walked right into the room, and it seemed as though she tapped into a latent spirit of warmth in the school and made it come alive. In fact, I felt a little like a bad

activist when she came in, wondering why on earth I hadn't had the guts to do the same thing.

Eventually, I learned from *militantes* like Laura that my mode of being at the school and being comfortable is to go ahead and do the things that seem to me the right thing to do, to do them cheerfully and not resentfully, and not to worry too much about who else is or is not doing them.

SOCIAL SCIENCES CLASS

As it gets closer to 5:30, the classroom starts to fill up and the benches are all put down. I'm greeting students and chatting a bit with them. When I ask if we should begin ("*arrancar*"), my mind flashes back to the meeting where I first learned this word. Mari kept saying that we should try to "*arrancar*" by 5:30 if at all possible. I was confused by the word because I hadn't heard it before, but it seemed to mean "begin." However, my understanding was that the classes began at 5, so I was thrown off. Eventually, I understood that she was in fact saying "classes are from 5 to 9, so please try really hard to begin by 5:30."

Alone as the teacher for the first time, I ask the students if we should begin and I outline the plan for the class. The previous Thursday, my co-teacher Romina and I met at a café near Congress to plan the next few classes, but after all that work, we remembered only at the end of our meeting that it was going to be May Day and that we'd like to plan a lesson around that (this seemed to happen to us with every holiday – we planned a

lesson and then remembered at the last minute we had meant to plan around the upcoming holiday!). We planned the two classes in light of two important things. The first was our overall plan for the year, which had been developed over a series of meetings with social sciences teachers from previous years and those working with different groups of students. The second factor was more pressing at this particular meeting: the outcome of our lesson on culture the day before, which felt like something of a disaster. At our follow-up meeting, then, we spent a while talking about and planning our next few classes, as well as discussing ideas for the class more generally and developing our understanding of our students' needs and skill levels.

During the next several days, Romina and I sent a half dozen emails back and forth finalizing our plan for this week and looking for someone to co-teach with me in her place. Finally I found some great videos to show in class about May Day, and decided to face the challenge of teaching solo.

I am really excited about teaching the history and significance of May Day. I really like the videos I've found, and I'm proud of myself for putting together a lesson by myself and developing some ideas for an engaged, participatory lesson. Most of all, I'm excited to be teaching about May Day in an institution where there is support for me to clearly and openly teach about May Day politically—as the Haymarket martyrs—something that I haven't been able to do at the university in the U.S. This feels like teaching as me, about things I know but which are connected to the struggle in Argentina,

rather than trying to learn and then re-teach Argentine history, for example, and rather than trying to appear “objective” when teaching about things I’m passionate about.

Today, for the first half of the class, the students and I focus on clarifying the previous two class lessons about culture. As I said, last week Romina and I found ourselves in a mess; we used the lesson plan we inherited from the previous year’s teachers, and found ourselves teaching about a “wide view” of culture versus a “restrictive view” of culture. Among the students’ questions about the readings, several of them asked what “restrictive” itself meant, and though the lesson was predicated on a pre-existing notion of culture as the arts or upper class artifacts, none of the students started with any particular idea at all of culture. We ended up, finally, mired in a discussion with the students about the meaning of the word abstraction. It wasn’t that many of the students didn’t know the word, but rather that many of them didn’t understand the concept. They didn’t and hadn’t thought much in abstract terms it seems—their lives were very grounded in the concrete, material, everyday. I don’t know if this means that language is a necessary tool for abstract thought (though it might be), and I certainly do not want to suggest that poverty makes one unable to think in abstract terms. But on the other hand, it seems wrong to expect that everyone thinks and engages the world in the same way. I realize now this is what Freire’s method of literacy was really about, only I never understood it until I was confronted with it.

Romina and I planned, then, to revisit—more simply this time—the idea of culture, in order to try to get the basic idea down. Then we wanted to move into history,

and a discussion of the native peoples of the Americas (primarily the Maya, Aztec, and Incas). So today my plan is to try to take a step back from the previous two weeks' lessons on culture and clarify the main points in order to move forward. I start with a more basic exercise that consists of a series of 6 pictures and ask the students to identify each as either "nature" or "culture." Then we move on to create a table describing Latin American culture. The students list examples of culture: foods, arts, tools, housing, and language. Rosa, a young woman of about 20 wearing very girlish makeup, looks embarrassed as she asks me if "film" is an example of culture. I tell her yes, and when I ask why she's concerned, she replies that she's not sure because she's never been to a movie theater.

Raquel, who is a larger woman of about 25 with dyed blonde hair and a brash personality, comes in around 6 o'clock. Several other students who sit at her table arrive at the same time. Raquel walks directly up to the middle of the class, kisses me on the cheek, and asks what we're doing. Every week I am annoyed by this, because it seems to me that she should try to fit in with the class and catch up, as an acknowledgment that she has missed the first 30 minutes of class. This seems to me as a way of daring me to chastise her for being late, which I'm also not going to do. This is popular education, and we are all supposed to be autonomous adults responsible for ourselves here. I think that she should come on time because she wants to and because she understands that it's important, not because the teacher is trying to make her.

Anyway, as Raquel and the rest of her table mates show up, the class really gets going. I am aware that in other subjects (held on other days of the week), class often doesn't start until this time anyway, but I guess I am more North American than I thought because it seems ludicrous and impossible to me to wait until the inevitable 6 o'clock arrivals if more than half the class is there and ready to go at 5:35.

As the students get started, I go around to each table and answer questions. This part of the class time usually involves me fully re-explaining the assignment multiple times, at multiple tables. Some students act as if they can't understand my accent/Spanish, though I am sure that has equally to do with the fact that the terminology and concepts that I'm using are difficult and new to them. I have learned that although I am a non-native speaker, my reading comprehension and sometimes listening comprehension is actually much higher than many of the students', which is a surprising and profound realization. Of course, the students know tons of words that I don't—but I have a clear advantage when it comes to written Spanish.

Students work on the lesson, identifying aspects of Latin American culture and hopefully learning to valorize their own culture as important.

Around 7 o'clock we break for *merienda* (tea time). One of the school's rituals is to prepare and share *merienda* together every day. We break for 20 to 30 minutes in the middle of our classes, and the idea is to all sit together and socialize a little bit. Both classes, the second and first years, the teachers and the students, come together, and the kids come out of the nursery and join the larger group as well. We always have hot

chocolate and sweetened *mate cocido*¹⁵ and some kind of snack food. Depending what is in the kitchen, we have sandwiches or bread with *dulce de leche*.

During *merienda*, I struggle with the projector, trying to get it to recognize my laptop. Diego, the computers teacher, happens to be there and he can't get it working either. Nor can I get any of the files on my flash drive to play through the DVD player. The students finally encourage me to give up, and insist that they'll be able to crowd around my laptop. It's not ideal, but at least they are curious what I've gone to so much trouble to bring for them to watch.

The students are challenged a little by the lesson (constructing a timeline of the Haymarket massacre and the struggle for the eight hour work day), but they also seem interested in the new information. Workers' Day is an official holiday in Argentina, but they've never known about the labor movements that inspired it, and as activists themselves they are intrigued. They ask questions, about the lesson as well as about my relationship with the subject matter, and by the end of the class the students and I seem to know each other a lot better. A few weeks later when we are discussing a possible cinema outing, Micaela tells Romina "we went to the movies right here, with Meg's computer."

STARTING THE YEAR

This is what class was like once we were starting to find our groove together as a group several weeks in, but the school year in 2011 at the people's high school had

¹⁵ *Yerba mate* brewed together in a large soup pot as a tea.

started in fits and starts. The first few weeks of school were a bit chaotic, and somewhat confusing for many of the new students as well as myself. There were several different kinds of meetings before classes ever started, and the schedule for the first day of classes kept changing.

My first official school activity was a recruitment meeting for new teachers that was held in February. This was an informational session for me and five or so other potential new teachers that was facilitated by 5 or so continuing teacher-activists. The activists explained the principle of the people's high school and how it operated. Most of the time was spent answering questions from the new recruits about teaching: what subjects are taught, what are the students like, what if you don't feel totally confident teaching, etc.

Then a few weeks later, I went to a work party where we worked together to build a second story on top of the school's rented building and to build more tables and chairs. Since this location had only opened the previous year, it had previously only held one class at a time. Now, with the beginning of a new first year cohort, we would have two classes at all times, plus a child care room. So the movement (the MTD) decided to add a second story to the building themselves. We helped sweep the roof, and sorted through reused wood to find sets of boards that matched well enough to make benches. The brick walls were nearly finished, but no roof had yet been put on, and the work was very loosely directed by an activist from the movement who was an experienced carpenter.

Next there was a big meeting with all of the teachers for that year. At that meeting we organized ourselves into teams—two or three teachers for each class—and then we broke up into two groups, one for each location of the school. From there, we negotiated everyone’s schedules to decide which classes would be held on which days, trying our best to accommodate the schedules of everyone who wanted to teach.

Then I went to a meeting of all the social sciences teachers from both locations, or more accurately, a meeting that was supposed to be all of the social sciences teachers. In reality, there were only four of us who were able to attend—interestingly the four of us who turned out to be the social sciences teachers at the Barracas school. There we spent a few hours debating the curriculum we wanted to cover that year for the first and second year students.

Finally, the first week of school arrived, about a month after the teacher recruitment meeting. But we still didn’t have classes. Instead, classes were suspended for the first week of school while we finished the construction of the second story. During what was to have been our first class period, my co-teachers Romina and Leo¹⁶ and I shared a *yerba mate* and spent more time discussing the curriculum for the year.

In the end, the second story was never constructed. Apparently the movement had consulted with the landlord of the building before beginning construction, but just when school was set to finally start, the landlord ordered the MTD to halt construction on the

¹⁶ Leo helped us plan, but was unable to follow through with co-teaching the class because of a work conflict on Wednesday evenings. But, as an experienced *militante* who had taught the class last year, as well as a personal friend of mine, he remained somewhat involved in curriculum planning and an important source of advice throughout the year.

building. This left the school in a difficult position. We had already been registering people for the first class assuming that we would have a much larger space upstairs for those classes, so around 50 students were set to begin the year. And now we were left with three small rooms to accommodate this group, plus their children, plus the 12 or so students in the second year cohort. With no time left to delay the beginning of the school year, the best solution anyone could come up with was to divide the first year cohort into two classes. After orientation, we decided to cut the four hour class time in half, arranging for the first year cohort to come in two shifts. The first group attended class from 5 to 7 pm, while the second came from 7 to 9 pm. *Merienda* was scheduled from 6:50 to 7:10, and the intention was for the group as a whole to be present during that time each day.

ORIENTATION

So, finally, one week late, orientation began.

For the first week of school, we decided to plan a series of activities to introduce the students to the school and to the MTD. These activities were patterned on the previous years' activities, and included videos, our first assembly, discussions, and activities. Each teacher would come on the day of their class along with some of the experienced teachers returning from last year.

My day of the week was Wednesday, so after much anticipation and five meetings, I attended my first night as a teacher at the school. I got there a bit early, since I

had found the bus crowded and slow the previous week, and was the second person there. Waiting outside the building when I arrived I found Teresa, the second year natural sciences teacher. She was in a mildly bad humor, a condition that turned out to be fairly normal for her at the school. Teresa was older than most of the other activists at the school and remained until the end of the year uncomfortable with the movement's politics and often frustrated by the situation at the school (she did not return to teach in 2012). She was a full-time chemistry teacher during the day, and eventually I learned that she had been a Peronist activist in her youth. Her background gave her more experience and comfort at the school than many other activists; she was not only an experienced teacher but neither was she new to activism. Her political background also, however, gave her a certain set of expectations about how to "do" activism and a certain cynical aura. She was annoyed to find the door locked after 5 o'clock (the time we were supposedly to start), and we made small talk while we waited.

After a few minutes, Pablo, a *militante*, pulled up in an unmarked cab carrying a stereo and speakers and opened up the school building. We followed him in with a few students who had shown up, and began to set up the porch classroom for that night's activities.

A little after 5:30, we began the orientation activities. Eventually, Romina and Leo my co-teachers in the first year social sciences class, arrived. Along with them, Mari, Cecilia, and a few other teachers were there, as well as about 35 students. We began the night's activities with a video made by the movement (there were supposed to be two but

the second one didn't work). The video was about the events that happened on the Puente Puerreydon in 2002, when two activists were killed by police following a series of blockades which paralyzed the city. The video looked similar to many I've seen made by Independent Media Centers globally, and told the activists' side of the news story. The footage was grainy and sort of hard to follow, and looking back on it I doubt that many of the students followed the video very well. The videos were meant to introduce students to the politics and foundation of the movement, connecting our school to the political crisis in 2001 and especially its dramatic aftermath in 2002.

Following the video screening, Mari and Leo led a discussion attempting to highlight just this connection. This was my first real surprise about the students at the school; as an outsider activist always playing catch-up to understand the history and context of political struggles in Argentina, I was shocked to hear Mari ask the large group what happened in December 2001. Surely, I thought, everyone in the room would be more aware than me of those heady, revolutionary, crisis-ridden days.

But instead, a few students tentatively began to try to answer, piecing together what they remembered about "the crisis." Of course, the younger students had only been 5 or 6 in 2001 and so had no real personal memories of their own. But even so, I (naively) expected these students to be deeply aware of the lasting changes the upheaval had left on the country. Instead I found that a few students described political actions they had taken part in, while many others were silent. Painstakingly, we reconstructed the recent history as a group in broad strokes, locating the foundation of the MTD in the

larger history of struggle, establishing the connection between ourselves and the National Assembly, and eventually ending with the foundation of our own particular people's high school.

During this discussion, several people mentioned "the *piqueteros*," which I found odd since I thought WE were "the *piqueteros*." Some people, in a sort of "where were you when ..." conversation, said that they had been a *piquetera*, or mentioned that they had had some involvement with "the *piqueteros*," in a sort of abashed or shy way. This conversation went on with a sort of gentle nudging for a little while. Then one of the few male students in the room spoke up, in response to something positive a *militante* said about the *piqueteros*.

"What about those people with sticks?"¹⁷ Alberto demanded to know. "If you want work, why do you always have to stop people from getting to work?" I was struck by Alberto's use of *you* (*ustedes*). As a new student at the school, he was, after all, also now part of this group of disruptive people with sticks.

"Can you tell us more what you think about it?" Mari asked.

"Well if they aren't doing anything wrong, then why are they [meaning the *piqueterxs*] always so violent then?" Alberto mentioned his brother who was a

¹⁷ Where there are quotation marks or dialogues, these have been reconstructed from my fieldnotes and memory. In most cases with group situations I am recreating the conversation based on paraphrased notes, not direct quotations.

policeman, and wanted to know why, if protestors were not the violent ones, they covered their faces and carried those big sticks.¹⁸

“Actually, it’s just the opposite. The National Assembly always works hard to guarantee a peaceful protest,” Mari answered. She suggested that, as we just saw in the videos, protestors needed to protect themselves, and pointed out that the sticks were to help stop traffic and keep the rest of the protestors safe. Teresa also jumped in here to say that one could never know whether protestors were violent, or rather instead if it was violent people just kind of jumping into a protest or, even worse, infiltrators from the police working to make the protestors look bad (at this, several people nodded and made sounds of agreement).

I was not the only one in the room shocked by this question (or was it really an assertion?). Later, in the car, Leo, one of the school’s founding activists, asked Romina and I “what about that policeman dude?! What was up with that?!!!” But after 9 more months at the school, I no longer find Alberto’s question so surprising. The students at the school weren’t apolitical, they were mostly so marginalized and illiterate that they simply hadn’t considered a lot of these questions before. Furthermore, as some of the more active members of the shantytown community, many were more likely to see the cops as their allies in protecting them from violence than not (though this obviously wasn’t universally true). It is telling, however, that Alberto knew so little about the

¹⁸ The iconic image of a *piqueterx* is a person with their face wrapped in a keffiyeh-like scarf, with a stick in their hands and work clothing on, standing near a barricade or stack of burning tires. Inside the movement, we referred to these activists as working “security” because their job was to go first in blockading the road and be a frontline to keep cars (and maybe would-be harassers) away from protestors.

school before orientation that he, and perhaps many others, were fairly unaware that he was sitting in the room with “those people with sticks” and with others who had given up more comfortable middle class lifestyles to support “those people with sticks,” “those *piqueteros*.”

ASSEMBLIES AND CONSENSUS

During the 11 months that I participated in assemblies at the people’s high school, only once did I see a decision blocked by a single person. Most times the discussion was such that people weighed in to shape the proposal or idea rather than objecting to a mostly formed one (more on this in Chapters 6 and 7), but on that same orientation night, the first assembly of the year, I saw the closest thing to a veto happen.

We were crammed in to the porch (which doubled as the first year classroom) at the front of the building. A few students were sitting in the neighboring classroom and looking through the window that opened between the two spaces. Other students crowded around the door to the porch, or were looking into the porch through a window that connected the covered hallway to this particular classroom. Although many of those in the hallway were there because they were slightly reluctant to participate, the crowded atmosphere lent the assembly an energy that it sometimes lacked, the way having more bodies in a room sometimes adds to the excitement or tension of a moment.

At this particular assembly, we had several agenda items: cleaning, childcare, finances, snack time, agreements, t-shirt and banner, and evaluation. Mari suggested that

we also discuss the possibility of cooperative contributions to the school. She told us that last year everyone paid five pesos each month to make a fund for the school, and that students also contributed a larger amount twice, when they received each half of their state-sponsored scholarships. The fund was then used for collective expenses like the TV in the kids' room for showing movies while their parents were in class, or buying new plastic cups for our nightly snack break. Mari suggested that this year we could do other stuff with the money, like perhaps have an outing to the movie theater.

Several people spoke up immediately in favor of the idea, saying that the school needed a lot of things and we should all do our part. In particular, several mothers who were new to the school said passionately that we should all give as much as we possibly could so that the nursery would be well-stocked and the kids well taken care of during the four hours each evening that their parents were in class.

“So,” said Mari, “how much should we each contribute?” And that’s when the conflict began.

The group started throwing around numbers to decide how much they should pay in April and July when they received their scholarship payments (AR\$1940 total per year disbursed in two payments). One of the new activists threw out a large number, saying that we needed a lot if we were going to buy decent things. Other people threw out much smaller numbers, and people began hollering around to clarify if the suggestions were meant as a total donation, or if people meant this amount to be paid twice. Daniel (who

had more experience in movement spaces than most students) called for people to calm down and wait their turn.

Linda, a new student, raised her hand, and then wondered out loud: “Should people be giving part of their scholarship to the school? If someone is receiving a scholarship, I assume it’s because they need it for themselves.”

Another new student, Tania, jumped in defensively and pointed out that some people not getting scholarships needed them too. “Some of us have done everything to get scholarships but the paperwork is still messed up.”

Mari said: “That’s right, if you are getting the scholarship it’s because people here helped you get it.”

“So we need to do our part to support this place,” someone else added.

We went around like this a few more times, and most people started to support the idea of giving 50 pesos from each scholarship payment, saying that it wasn’t that much of a sacrifice but that it would give us a good fund for the school. At this point, an older woman, Marta, said, “I’m poor, and I don’t have a job right now, and after buying food and everything, I don’t have 50 pesos to contribute. I think 50 is too much.”

At this, people repeated their previous arguments about how important it was to give money, somewhat more indignantly. Marta reiterated that she didn’t have it, and thought it was too much. The newer activists who had been so enthusiastic about the common fund began to get frustrated with what they saw as Marta’s refusal to compromise or go along with everyone else. One woman went so far as to point out that

Marta was only a single woman, while many of them were receiving the same scholarship but attempting to feed entire families from it. Others implied that if people with families were willing to part with the money and she wasn't, she must just be stingy. Marta seemed to become uncomfortable with the disagreement, but she crossed her arms and held her ground.

At this point, one new student-activist looked to the experienced activists facilitating the meeting. "Why can't we just vote for 50 pesos? It's only one person who disagrees." Ernesto, an experienced *militante* responded: "We don't do things that way here. Here we make sure that everyone is part of a decision, and that we all agree. Let's move on and talk about something else on the agenda now and come back to this later."

There was some grumbling, but no one challenged Ernesto about moving on. We did not return to the issue that night.

A month later we discussed the issue again. This time, there was tension between the mass of first year students in the assembly (more than 30 of them were there, filling the room) and the few second year students who were present (there were only 16 students in their cohort and only 2 or 3 were present at the assembly). The second year students wanted to hold off on making a decision that would affect everyone, because so many of their classmates were not there. A few other people in the assembly pointed out that if they were so concerned about the decisions being made, then those students should come to the assemblies. There was a little bit of sidetalk and sniping back and forth about

this, until an experienced activist intervened to point out that we can't hold decisions back for people who aren't there.

Again, a first year student suggested that we take a vote since only three or four people were in disagreement, but this time the suggestion was ignored by the assembly at large. There was an undercurrent of implication that the new first year students are more enthusiastic and "better" activists, while the second year students seem frustrated by the much larger group of newcomers and their lack of experience or knowledge of the movement. But when a few of the less outspoken first year students asked what problem the second years had with the proposal, the only answers given were a few shrugs and "don't knows."

Then in an irritated tone, a first year student Jeny suggested that first and second year students should decide the issue separately. Immediately, two of the math teachers squashed this idea, saying that we are one school, not two distinct groups, so we will make the decision as one group.

At this point, a short silence fell. Suddenly it seemed that no one could say why they disagreed with the plan anymore and no one was interested in opposing it. One of the math teachers, Pablo, asks if we have a decision then to pay 5 pesos each month and 50 pesos from each scholarship payment. No one disagreed, and it seemed as if we had reached consensus. Ernesto called for a round of applause and the decision was made.

Chapter 4: The Status Quo along the Riachuelo

I turn on the tape recorder, and the first thing Andrés says is, “I’ve suffered a lot.” I am taken aback; I haven’t asked anything about suffering, and in the interviews I’ve done up to now with teacher-activists, I haven’t heard anything about it either. Furthermore, in class Andrés can only be described as happy-go-lucky.

I do, however, know a little about Andrés’ life, and I know that it is not an easy one. He, like all of the students, lives in the sprawling, crowded *villa miseria* that extends almost into the water of the polluted Riachuelo. But still, I am surprised by the dark statement. In the classroom, Andrés is talkative and outgoing. He is known as the perpetual volunteer in the first year class, always willing to stand at the blackboard and take notes. He has a passion for U.S. pop culture, and as an eighteen year old, he is sometimes more interested in music and chatting with the other teenagers in the class than in engaging in the actual class material. He makes jokes, he is loud, but he has never once been disrespectful in any way at all, and I can hardly recall a time I have seen him not smiling. And yet, when he begins the narrative of his life, it starts with “I’ve suffered a lot.”¹⁹

¹⁹ When Andrés insists that I recognize his suffering, I think he is insisting that I understand the answer to this question before I can embark on the task of social change. Not only is he insisting that I understand the dimensions of suffering he endures, but he is also signaling the social marginalization that accompanies the situation in the *villa miseria* and the lifeworlds of its residents. Andrés assumes, somewhat rightly, that I am unaware of the hardships he and many others like him are facing. By telling me in such explicit terms that he has “suffered a lot,” he is, I think, acknowledging the social distance between us. He wants me to understand in blunt and certain terms that his life is *worse than mine*. Having observed his interactions with other students in the classroom and other activists in the movement, I’ve never heard him talk this way. The way he tells his story *to me* is a product of the very social distance we are trying to transform and close via our relationship at the school.

Nor is he exaggerating. In response to a general question about his life, Andrés told me the long, convoluted story of how he came to move from Paraguay, to Misiones²⁰, and back, and finally to Buenos Aires. The story became more depressing and picked up steam when Andrés' mother marries his stepfather. "That's when," says Andrés, "my nightmare began." Andrés explained how his stepfather abused him, and how he was involved in court cases testifying against him. At one point, his stepfather poisoned him in an attempt to kill him. Somewhere in the middle of all this, Andrés stopped being able to attend school because of difficulties transferring paperwork between schools and across borders.

Andrés story is not only a sad one about an individual student, but it is also the result of structural and social conditions surrounding the individual. This chapter is about defining the status quo that the people's high school is struggling against and trying to change. Central to the political project of the people's high school is the phrase "social change" but until we understand how things *are*, we can't understand or evaluate how the movement tries to change them. Briefly put, this chapter argues that this status quo is neoliberalism. More specifically this chapter uses interviews as well as observations to show how neoliberalism is actually experienced by participants in the people's high school, prior to and outside of their involvement with the school. The overlapping themes that arose from these conversations with students were lack of education; poor and unstable living conditions; vulnerability to violence as well as illness; and a profound

²⁰ A province in the north of Argentina that borders Paraguay and Brazil.

sense of loneliness and marginalization. These experiences then become the basis for the intervention posed by the people's high school and the MTD Barracas.

MARXISM ON THE MARGINS

One Wednesday in September, I prepared an activity for the class as part of our unit on the economy that was meant to introduce Marxism and several associated concepts. I asked the students to break into three groups (which was easy, since they were more or less already sitting around three tables) and assigned each table a role: factory owner, factory worker, or unemployed. The plan was to play out a Marxist conflict between workers and have students learn something about capitalist imperative to profit as well as better understand the logic behind the workers' coops and recovered factories that they had heard so much about through the movement by starting with understanding the means of production.

But first I asked the students to meditate for a few minutes on the broader meaning of social class. I directed each table to tell me where they might live, what kinds of things they might eat, and what kinds of things they did at work. At this point, the lesson quickly became as educational for me as it was for the students.

The table assigned to be the unemployed workers had no trouble at all answering the questions. Of course, they were essentially being asked to describe their actual living conditions. They surprised me, however, when they spent their time writing a letter. Rather than a list of details about their lifestyle, they wrote a poignant reflection on the

difficulty of their condition, especially the problems they encountered looking for work outside the neighborhood. They described in detail how they had to lie about their addresses on job applications in order to avoid the shame of being refused a job for being *villeros*. And they described how, even when they gave another address, sometimes they would be ‘found out’ by a potential employer, who would ask shrewdly whether the address given was really the one where they lived.

I was impressed not only with the detail, but by the format of their response. Their choice to describe their experiences in a letter implied an addressee, and it seemed to me, as the teacher facilitating the activity, that that addressee was me. Thus their response did not only convey the materiality of their experiences with unemployment and residence in the *villa*. On another level it also conveyed their desire for me to understand these experiences.

As the exercise continued, I began to understand that students at the school weren’t simply unemployed; they were excluded from the very idea or possibility of a working class. Not only did they connect their material/temporary status of unemployment with a sense of self, but they couldn’t even imagine what it meant to be working class.

The table assigned to be bosses struggled a little at first with their answers, unsure exactly whether they might live in a fancy apartment or what. Eventually, however, they found their footing (based largely on the guidance of one student who recalled a boss she had actually had) and reported that they lived in an apartment right next to a fancy

shopping mall in an upscale part of the city. When asked what kind of food they ate—for example, did they eat out, or cook all of their own food, and how often?—they responded pertly that they ate a lot of sushi (a relatively new luxury cuisine in Buenos Aires). Finally, regarding how they spent their time, they suggested that they spent a lot of time on the phone talking to other people about “stocks and stuff.”

The workers’ table, though, simply could not answer any of the questions. They were unsure what their wages would be as factory workers. None of them had ever been employed for any significant period of time at the legal minimum wage nor, more startlingly, did they seem to know anyone who had. Just as tellingly, once Romina relayed the legal minimum wage to them, their eyes grew wide but the neighborhood they described living in for workers at such a lucrative job was one that most middle-class residents of Buenos Aires would consider a little dodgy. It wasn’t simply that stable employment in the formal sector with minimum wage and other benefits seemed unlikely or remote. The fact was that these students could not even imagine such a possibility.

This exercise became a kind of concrete touchstone for me in understanding and explaining the marginalization students experienced in their daily lives outside of the school. These activists were not merely down on their luck but were quite literally removed from all possibility or experience with stability. They saw wealth on television (as in commercials for the shopping mall or for sushi restaurants), and experienced it in person as they worked for small enterprises or in the homes of the wealthy. They had no such experience of working class life. Their exclusion was so complete that as students in

an adult high school, they still could not even call to their imaginations the lifestyle the hoped-for fruits of such a diploma would bring. Such exclusion reached far beyond the material implications of poverty (which were far from insignificant) and deep into the realm of subjectivity.

THE VILLA 21-24

Living in the *villa* heightened the experience of exclusion, as the students were marooned and segregated to the banks of the Riachuelo. Running along the polluted river contaminated by more than a century of industrial runoff, the *villa* is explicitly demarcated from other urban territory that more clearly belongs to the city of Buenos Aires. Although the *villa* is inside the official city limit (and not, therefore, in “the province” like so much of the sprawling greater Buenos Aires area), the *villa* both is and isn’t an official part of the city. Compounding the economic exclusion described by the students in class was their physical marginalization onto some of the city’s least desirable property. The Villa 21-24 (as it is officially known) has existed in this area for more than fifty years,²¹ but it nonetheless constitutes a kind of no-man’s land where building codes, property titles, commercial regulation and even at times the rule of law don’t always apply. The city and national governments throughout this period have vacillated between strong interest in the *villa* and studied ignorance. Student-activists, who were all residents

²¹ According to Bozzola et al. (2013), the area on which the Villa 21-24 sits was occupied as early as 1885 by scavengers who made their living off the trash incinerator, but there was an eviction in 1917. Other settlements began to pop up around 1940, although the *villa* recognizable today as the Villa 21-24 was founded around 1960.

of the Villa 21-24 with a single exception, described bright spots to living in the *villa*, but they also described overwhelming exclusion, violence, poverty, and poor sanitation.

Fieldtrip

A few months before the end of the school year, one of the teacher-activists started proposing more seriously the idea of a guided tour of the *villa miseria* for the other teachers. Students were clearly interested in educating the teacher-activists about the *villa*; the enthusiasm and urgency was palpable every time a lesson sparked a conversation about what the *villa* was really like. So after planning the outing over the course of a few assemblies, the trip was arranged for a Saturday morning and a loose route was planned.

Among the teachers, I was the most impressionable. This trip was my first entry to any *villa miseria* and although I was obviously not clueless about the nature and extent of poverty and marginalization, I was largely ignorant of the specific form it took within the *villa*. Students and other teachers, I think, knew this, as some of the teacher-activists on the trip had been to a few students' homes and even the others who hadn't, as Argentines, were a bit less clueless. I felt, therefore, that at least a few of the students in particular wanted me to see and understand their reality.

We gathered at the intersection of Luna and Iriarte, where the official city ends and the informal one begins. There were four or five teachers and three or four students in the group. As we went, we discussed the different zones and neighborhoods inside the

villa, the largest in the city. We began near a fenced off factory and walked on a set of train tracks where building construction was perilously close to the tracks. Our agenda included stopping by to visit the homes of some former and current students of the people's high school, particularly a few of those who had wanted to continue attending but for health and other personal reasons had given up at the midpoint of the year, winter break. Throughout the tour, a student I was particularly close to, Juana, walked with me and explained certain things, like how the lack of clear property rights translated into fear and insecurity for renters and even homeowners, as they feared the possibility that their home would be easily hijacked by armed thugs, leaving the original occupants with no legal rights to reclaim it.

On the edge of the *villa*, visible even from the school building, one can see buildings made almost exclusively of large, bright red bricks.²² The buildings are two or three stories, and throughout 2011, one could always observe ubiquitous construction projects, especially adding additional stories onto existing buildings. As we left the factory area, along the outer ring, we began to wind our way through other neighborhoods within the overarching *villa*. Construction in the *villa* is characterized by attempts to maximize the limited space, and is non-standard resulting from the lack of regulation. The effect of all of this ad-hoc construction is that passages are often narrow with overhanging porches above, and the neighborhood itself is composed of a series of winding paths, sometimes no more than a single person's width. On our way to visit

²² Based on fieldwork with other movements not included here, I know that some MTDs make these bricks themselves in a relatively low-tech way.

students' homes we filed down several such passages, ducking beneath ladders and picking our way around stray dogs and their droppings. Overhead electrical wires swung from building to building, sometimes more precariously than others. Patios, front doors, windows and even small courtyards, all protected by barred gates, lined either side of the passages.

Throughout the *villa* these passages opened onto wider streets and sometimes plaza-like spaces with soccer fields or volleyball nets. Wider streets were passable to cars and usually residents' parked cars lined the sides. The avenues bordering the *villa* were bustling with small commercial stands, especially vegetable stands peddling Paraguayan roots not commonly found at vegetable stands in other parts of the city.

As we walked, we moved toward a poorer and more precarious sector. Getting closer to the polluted Riachuelo, the buildings changed from colorful multi-story bricks to single-story units with corrugated tin walls, or walls made from stacked cans or bottles. Here we called at the house of a student-activist who had dropped out of the first year, a shack with a dirt floor in the most ramshackle part of the *villa*. We stood in the mud in front of Liz's house as she explained some of the current neighborhood struggles in this part of the *villa*. We said our goodbyes to Liz and made our way down the winding dirt path closer to the water. Juana looked at me and asked "Can you smell that?"

"The river?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "Imagine how gross it is in the summer."

Davis (2006) states that one of the factors in slum construction is when a slum is located on land that is non-marketable (often because of a slump in the city's real estate market). This was clearly the case in this particular *villa*. Some of the shacks were practically sliding into the Riachuelo, an old canal that flows out to the enormous Rio de la Plata that has been used as a dumping ground for industrial waste for over a century.

Within the *villa*, it was easy to tell that these were the newest and most precarious development, and the domain of those without the political power to organize an expansion on the *villa*'s outer borders, and those who couldn't afford to purchase already settled property. The unmarketable land within the unmarketable land, because Juana's point was precisely that: the stench of the Riachuelo made the whole *villa* unbearable at times. And her comment signaled to me that those who lived within the range of the stench weren't simply conditioned to it, or at least not all of them. Like Juana, some of the *villa*'s residents experienced the humiliation and disgust of living in these conditions keenly on a regular basis, not merely when showing it around to outsiders.

STUDENT-ACTIVISTS' EXPERIENCE OF THE VILLA

Juana

As Juana and I shared a *mate* at my dining room table, she described a chunk of her life story to my digital recorder. Juana, now a woman in her 30s, told me how she had come from Bolivia with her oldest child, her daughter Maria, and Maria's father. She talked about how difficult it was for many years to eke out their survival and especially

how she struggled with her own health, and then the health of her children. Her son, Daniel, developed meningitis as a small child and continued to suffer with health problems as well as developmental and emotional barriers that she struggled to find assistance with. Although she came to Argentina without documents, when Daniel was born she was able to normalize her status as well as Maria's.

She also discussed her feelings about living in the *villa* again, this time more directly, perhaps without fear of other student-activists or residents overhearing her. As Juana was telling me about struggling with the decision to come back to Argentina after returning to Bolivia for a time, she began:

After that, when I came back, I came back with the idea to one day leave the neighborhood. Or if not, if I couldn't leave, well, then I'd rather make a house in my country but...

MLK: To leave to live in another neighborhood?

Yes, to leave to live in a neighborhood.

MLK: To leave the *villa*?

To leave the *villa*, that. That was always my idea, so much so that for that reason I didn't buy furniture. I barely have the basics. For everyone, I mean, I don't, I don't have...

MLK: Because you were always waiting.

Right. Always. Still. I still haven't done it because I think that if I buy furniture—because most people buy furniture, like I don't know, a sofa, closets, all that stuff—I think that if I buy it then I'm going to resign myself and—and—and—I'm going to give in, and keep staying. So no. I don't want that. I don't want that. I want to leave one day, and if I can't then I'd rather go back to my country. But I'm not

going back on the street either, I'm not taking the kids back on the street. It has to be a house more or less, right? A livable house...

MLK: So for you life in the *villa* isn't something... it's not enough, and it's not forever—

—No, no.

MLK: —it's something for an emergency, something that is out of need but—

Yeah. Something out of need. Nothing else, and after that no, no, no. I don't know, I don't want to give in. Sometimes I'm afraid that—because I feel like things happen, with my kids, and I keep staying and staying and it's like, I don't want that. I want to do something. If not a good job, well then I have to build my skill set like now I'm going to our school, or look for some other link to build my skill set. I don't want to be there, giving in, you could say. No, no. I want to teach that to her too, to Maria [her daughter], right? So that she knows that you can have a better life.²³

What is striking to me about this part of Juana's interview is not only how determined she was to leave the *villa*, but how afraid she was of giving in to it. Juana's determination and fear of getting too comfortable are a familiar story for migrants, but in this case the tension wasn't between her home and adopted countries but rather between outside and inside the *villa*. The *villa* seems to be a space for Juana that is at once comfortable (tempting one to give in or *conformarse* in Spanish) but at the same time not a real place. It is no place, she says, to make a life. It's a place outside of life, where one

²³ Ellipses here all indicate pauses or places where voices trailed off. This section of the interview is unedited.

has to worry and be on guard all the time, and acceptable only, she says, as a temporary way to avoid the street.²⁴

Later in her interview, I asked Juana what she thought about other student-activists, like Nancy, who had purchased land, built homes, and lived in the *villa* for decades, with no attempt to leave it. Juana said, in the privacy of my apartment, that from her point of view Nancy had given up. Nancy represented one of her worst fears: that she would one day simply accept the *villa*, with its horrible stench, crime, and precarity, as normal.

Even after hearing all this, months later, when I visited Juana in her house, I was stunned. This woman, who was so keenly aware of the *villa*'s many indignities and injustices, lived in what seemed to me dramatically inadequate conditions. Unlike the homes of some other older, more established *villa* residents, the home Juana shared with her two children was barely more than one room. In the anteroom was some storage and a small bathroom, followed by one big room that contained a kitchen, a dining room table, a television and a few belongings. In the corner was a ladder that went up to a hole in the ceiling, leading to the attic-like space where everyone slept.

The afternoon that I visited Juana and her children, we had a snack before heading to the school in time for class. As we wrapped up our snacks, Juana became increasingly anxious about getting out of the house. At first I thought this was because of the time; we were likely going to be a little late to the class, and Juana was always fantastically late to

²⁴ Recall that, as I quoted in Chapter 2, one of Juana's primary goals in attending the school was having a place outside the *villa* (even by a few blocks) for her and her children to spend time.

class and other appointments. But when the four of us (together with her adolescent kids) finally made it out the door I realized a big part of Juana's anxiety was driven by the walk ahead of us. Practically looming over us as we locked her door were three young men smoking *paco* (a cocaine by-product popular in the *villa*) and watching us. Worse, they were standing between us and the narrow stairway down to street level so all four of us were forced to push through their group single file as we left her house in the early evening. Later Juana mentioned her fears for her adolescent daughter and the forms of sexual violence that girls encounter in the neighborhood. Though I knew Juana to be one of the most confident, capable students in her class, her fear for her children as we exited the *villa* at sunset was palpable.

Gladys

Living in the villa was not only dangerous and toxic, but unstable as well. Gladys described the intense instability she had experienced with her partner over the last year or so, from the porch of the house in which she was renting a room. Gladys was a young woman of 23, a native born Argentine who was very talkative and affectionate although she did not have many friends among the other students at the school. Her specific room was located at the back of the house, and she shared it with her three daughters (ages 7, 3, and a newborn infant).

Gladys had been squatting in various houses with her partner over the past year, specifically in houses within the *villa* with absentee owners. She and her young family

had been kicked out of all of them. She described a conflict over the house her dad was living in, as well as other housing conflicts around her. Here she begins by describing her current living situation:

MLK: What is your apartment like? You live in a room right?

Yes.

MLK: Altogether, with the girls?

Yes, I'll show it to you in a bit. ... It's a small room. It's something like 3 x 4, you know, the room. Yeah, I have a crib, I have a large bed where I sleep with my partner, and a separate single bed where the oldest girl sleeps. And nothing else. I have 2 pieces of furniture and a TV and nothing else fits in there. Then in the entrance to my room here in the hallway – when we go look at it I'll show you – I have a piece of furniture where I keep the silverware, the linens, the stove, and everything on top of it there. It's small, really. And here I rent, and pay monthly.

MLK: And over there there's a house apart where the landlords live, or do other people live there? Is everything rented?

All of the house together is just for renters. The landlords, the people who just came by, rent—or rather live, they're from—the corner. They have a brick house, with two-stories, and it's separate from here. Here I live together with 2 other families. And there's just one bathroom, and the upstairs part is a taken-over (*tomado*) place. I mean, the woman who lived there was old, and some other people came, and got in there and took the house from her. And right now it's in the courts. Because you'd want this all to be together, right? But no, it's separate. And now here—

At this point Gladys gestured to the man standing a few feet away from us, who had been working on sawing or welding something next to us the whole time we had been sitting on the porch. He was in an interior part of the house, but the wall that separated us from him had a large opening with no glass in it. The construction work was loud, which fit

right in with the surrounding *villa*. People are constantly engaged in construction in this neighborhood. Most visible are the groups of men always working on adding second, third, or even fourth stories to buildings, but there is also a constant din of power tools and hammering coming from inside buildings like the one where Gladys lived where people are adding or remodeling rooms. Gladys continued,

they are fixing the room where the landlady is going to come because she can't go up the stairs anymore. She's pregnant, and when she has the baby she's going to come here. There's going to be a lot of us, really, huh? Living together is complicated because there are a lot of us.

MLK: And... I guess that there's one kitchen and one bathroom to share between everyone?

Yes, one bathroom for everyone. Everyone has their own stove. Some people have a bigger room so they fit the stove inside. But not me, because my room is really small, plus it would be suffocating when it came time to cook for the kids, so I'd rather leave it outside.

MLK: Can I ask you how much you pay?

Yeah. I pay 450 every month.²⁵

MLK: And where did you live before?

Before this I lived a few meters from here. ... I lived there in my house, with my dad. But since he went to jail, he lost everything. Well, I guess he didn't lose everything. I guess you could say that he started to have problems, and I moved out because I couldn't stand his lifestyle. And... a month after I left his house, he ended up in jail, so the house had to be sold. But the people who bought it didn't want to pay. Since my dad was in jail, they wanted him to stay there, and they just want to stay in his house and not pay. So I'm selling this house to solve the problem.

²⁵ AR\$450 at that time was about US\$105 per month.

Gladys continued, telling me about how her father had raised her as a single father and her relationship with her mother. She described her first pregnancy at 14, and told me a little bit about her life between that pregnancy and now. She tells me that she began to work at 16, after she had her first child and left high school in the late stages of her pregnancy:

MLK: And what work did you do?

Me? At that time? I was a waitress. I worked in a restaurant. I started by doing cleaning—the bathroom, the floor, and then I worked in the kitchen. After the kitchen, I ended up being a waitress, which is one of the highest rungs. I stayed there until I found a better job and then I left.

MLK: What was the better job?

The better job? Well it wasn't that much better. I was also a waitress in a restaurant—I waited tables in a *parilla*. They do barbecue (*asado*) and also traditional Argentine food. And it was a way better restaurant. I was there for a long time. Then, well, I met their father. The father of the two younger girls isn't the same as my oldest daughter. And then, well you could say things changed—No! Don't do that!

Gladys said to her middle daughter, who was dragging a metal object along the bars that surround the porch and making a horrible screeching noise. Gladys went on,

“It's as if things were better, he could support me.... He started to work—”

The little girl starts crying as Gladys removes the toy she was using to scrape the fence with. Gladys keeps talking to me calmly without taking any notice of the girl's fuss.

And so, well, after that I didn't work anymore, maybe a year or so, because I stayed with my daughter, and then I ended up pregnant again.... That year that he worked a lot of things happened. We moved, a lot. We tried to get something like renting an apartment, because here there are a lot of empty houses. They have landlords that are out of the country, and don't give any thought to the place. So, since we were in need of a place, we would go into a place, and then we would pay by month. Arrange it. ... Going in where the landlord never shows up seemed fair to us. So, we would arrive at a deal, and we'd pay a high rent to the people who had abandoned the place... then they'd end up throwing us out. So we'd always end up living with my dad, or with my mother-in-law. We still don't have our own house. We also have a lot of problems with our documents.

Unlike other student-activists, Gladys didn't particularly highlight the need to take care of small children or the difficulty of finding work as primary drivers of the precarity she experienced, although these themes were also apparent in her interview. Instead, in Gladys' case, the perhaps more basic concern of finding shelter took precedence as a concern. Within her narrative, we can start to get a sense of the shortage of housing the residents of the *villa* face and the crowded and inadequate conditions where many people live. But more particularly, each time that Gladys mentioned housing, the particular forms of this competition for shelter within the unregulated *villa* emerged clearly. In each case, the murky structure of ownership within an extra-legal neighborhood was clear. Whether it be her father's house, upstairs from where she lived at the time of the interview, or the houses she and her partner entered without permission, the questionable nature of property ownership and its non-synonymous relationship with possession within the *villa* were clear. The nature of the shantytown is such that leases and other forms of

contracts are an unsure guarantee against sudden reappearance of absentee owners or thugs looking to profit (just as Juana warned me on the tour).

Finally, Gladys' interview highlights the hierarchy *within* the margins more explicitly than Juana's. As Davis (2006) argues, landlordism further divides the poor from the poorer. This is abundantly clear in Gladys' case, as she casually referenced her landlords' housing options compared with her own and even more clearly discussed the absentee landlords who had empty houses while she had nowhere to sleep.

"Nuestra Aldea"

As a final project for their Language and Literature class, the first year students at the people's high school produced a short book. Each student wrote a short essay or short story for the book, and the teachers of the class typed up the contributions, wrote an introduction, and printed the collection. Students then made covers of the book out of cardboard, a project inspired by another Buenos Aires' publishing collective *Eloisa Cartonera*.²⁶ In the introduction to the book, Darío, one of the teacher-activists facilitating the project, wrote:

The series of short stories that make-up this booklet conform, for the most part, to fiction. ...

²⁶ Eloisa Cartonera sells books at independent bookstores around the city. The books are often reprints of classics, and each sports a distinctive cardboard cover that is handpainted. The project draws attention to the relationship between books, intellectualism, and poverty as *cartoneros* is a term used for people who gather cardboard around the city of Buenos Aires from the trash and re-sell it to the recycler. The *cartonero* phenomenon is one that is itself a product of the neoliberal 1990s and is a cultural phenomenon in its own right.

Nevertheless, they are barely disguised portraits, transparent fictions behind which we can easily detect the fingerprints of their narrators.

The accumulation of the tales, the simple and direct explanation of this familiar space, the *villa* (and sometimes, *The Villa*), repeated again and again by the individual voices, forms in the end an unconcealable clamor. ... *'Pinta tu aldea* [paint your village]' ... This is ours.

Though students weren't necessarily asked to reflect on the *villa*, it became the central character in each of their stories. Students' discussion of the *villa* without prompting demonstrates the extent to which their status as *villeros* dominated their lives. The instability and precarity it represented was an almost inescapable aspect of their lives, making it hard for them to reflect on their lives without also representing life in the *villa* and on the literal margins of Buenos Aires. And their representations, at least for the teachers at the school, became an "unconcealable clamor" crying out, perhaps, for collective action.

Violence was a major theme of students' stories about the *villa* both in class and in the book. One day during a class lesson on culture, students became very animated describing the "culture" of the *villa*. The lesson, which we inherited from the previous year's teachers, was meant to advance an expansive, anthropological view of "culture" in contrast to the idea of "cultured" as something associated with upper class tastes and arts. In order to do this, it included a short essay on the culture in the *villa*, which described the keeping of ponies, the construction of houses, and people's mannerisms, with the clear intention of valorizing working class or popular culture as equally valuable or

“good” to Culture. Reading the essay, the students got excited to talk about the culture of the *villa*, and the conversation quickly turned to an attempt to explain what the *villa* was like to my co-teacher Romina and I (since we were the only people in the room not intimately familiar with it). One student said that it seemed like the *villa* was filled with people “killing and robbing for fun.” Andrés, in particular, wanted my co-teacher and I to understand the instability with which all of the students lived. He said: “you don’t understand! In the villa, it’s like one person could be sitting and having *mate* while someone else is being murdered right there next to them.”

In the class’ book, one story in particular highlights the violence in the *villa*, and the ways that drug addiction and poverty are embedded in the daily life of residents. Written by one of the younger students, a girl of 16, the story is titled “Life beyond Money.” The story is about a girl named Esmeralda, who

...was a girl very distant from everyone; she was one of those girls who only thinks about having more than she has. But without realizing what was going to happen, she entered the world of drugs. Her mother loved her so much, seeing her daughter, lost in drugs, she decided to ask for help: she spoke with her daughter and asked her “Is this the life you want to lead?”

So, five months went by and the girl was rehabilitated, but she didn’t go back to her neighborhood because Esmeralda felt that if she returned to her neighborhood, where she was born and raised, she would run into her girlfriends who were leading the life she decided not to lead because of her love for her mother.

Martina, Esmeralda’s mother, took her to her grandmother’s house so that she wouldn’t fall back into drugs. Time passed, and Esmeralda grew up, and when she turned 21 she decided to be independent and pay her own way.

Esmeralda opened a clothing store, the business was paying off and was going very well.

One month later her mother called her and gave her terrible news: her best friend from childhood and part of her adolescence had died, and it seemed there had been a rape.

They found her body in a field outside of the city. Esmeralda, full of sadness, hatred, and fury, wanted to know why they did something so horrible to her best friend. She decided to take justice into her own hands. She went to her mother's house and began to investigate what her friend did, and the people she hung around. She discovered that her friend's ex worked in a house of prostitution. So Esmeralda went and asked for a job and the only thing she thought about was killing the man that killed her friend.

The days passed and Esmeralda began to notice that her friend's ex was getting interested in her, and without thinking twice she gave the guy a reason to get involved with her. But she thought about it and decided, instead of killing him, to turn him in to the police. And she knew that he had power and money, and that some police officers were involved in the same business.

She didn't care. That same night on September 2nd, she decided to call the police, and the whole place was evicted and those bad guys went to jail. But Román, before getting in to the cruiser threatened Esmeralda, saying, "You are going to die this very night, and when you least expect it you will be keeping your friend company."

Esmeralda, with no fear of anything, went to her house and in her mind said that she had already done justice for Natalia's death.

Upon arriving at her house, she hugged her mother tightly and said to her, "It's done, Mom. Now Natalia can rest in peace because the person who took her life from her is in jail."

Esmeralda taught the people in the neighborhood that killing or remaining silent solves nothing, but justice does. Although the police are not all the same. There are only five good ones in a hundred.

And money doesn't always solve problems.

I've chosen to include Yessica's entire story here because I think that, as Darío says in his introduction to the book, the events that Yessica chose to narrate and how she narrated them say a lot about herself in reality and the circumstances of her life. I do not know if any of the events narrated in the story have happened directly to Yessica, although certainly each separate part of the story is consistent with other things I heard from students about their lives and occasionally on the news. Esmeralda's descent into drugs, for example, is mirrored in a few comments in interviews about children or relatives who became hooked on drugs. Similar narratives about teenagers turning to drugs appear throughout other stories in the book as well.

Murder, rape, and other forms of violence also appeared frequently around the edges of conversations and interviews. Andrés addressed this topic most directly with his proclamation that someone could be having *mate* and another person could be killing someone right next to them, but the shadow of violence showed itself frequently in other ways, too. Andrés and other students would often be anxious about leaving class before dark if it seemed at all possible, and if not, they would try to walk home together. Or students would make casual reference to murder in class, asking for example if someone had had an accident or if "they killed him" and then explaining how a relative had been murdered so you can never tell. I don't want to imply, of course, that everyone was necessarily related to a murder victim who lived in the *villa*—I don't have enough direct information to make that judgment. Instead I want to call attention to the ways the spectre of violence was ever present in the students' minds.

Just before Yessica wrote this story she told me that she aspired to be a police officer. I found this surprising, since the MTD Barracas had a decidedly anti-police stance. There were other students whose personal goals contradicted the movement's goals in an obvious way (I discuss this in more detail in the Conclusion), but in most cases these students' involvement was limited to attendance at the school. Yessica, however, was an active participant in several movement spaces, including attending protests and at one point a job with the cooperative. Thus she was more attuned to and actively participating in the movement, and yet saw no contradiction or issue with her own future plans to be a police officer. Reading the story, however, I can see how Yessica reconciled these attitudes. According to the penultimate line of her story, she agreed with the MTD and National Assembly that most police officers were corrupt and untrustworthy, perhaps especially so within the *villa*. Yet she felt that the institution still held potential in a violent context with limited options.

During 2011, one of the Kirchnerista initiatives was to deploy more police officers within Buenos Aires' most troubled neighborhoods. Specifically, more officers from the Prefectura were deployed across southern Buenos Aires. In addition to simply increasing policing, their presence was meant to supplant that of the Policía Federal, widely felt to be extremely corrupt and still harboring high-ranking officers associated with the dictatorship (Kollmann 2011). The initiative was highly visible at the people's high school with its location on the boundary of the Villa 21-24. We began seeing busloads of officers unloading and leaving on foot patrol groups heavily padded with

bulletproof vests, often walking four across, as we left class at night. This initiative was received by activists and residents of the neighborhoods with mixed attitudes (Rodríguez 2011). On the one hand, many residents lived in fear of the thugs who seemed to run the neighborhood and were happy to have increased protection from them. One of the side effects of the *villa*'s informal construction is an inability for cars to enter many areas of the neighborhood (because of narrow streets). The dramatic increase in foot patrols put these areas under a much higher level of scrutiny. In other words, more state presence meant for some people and in some situations more care and protection from the state.

On the other hand, the increased policing lead to increased harassment, perhaps especially for young men. When we discussed the issue in class, for example, Andrés reported that an officer hit him in the head to reprimand him for not wearing a helmet while riding his motor scooter. This concern was echoed by others interviewed for the national paper *Página 12* (Rodríguez 2011). "Trigger-happy" police officers (*gatillo fácil*) are also a notorious problem in the *villa* which was another reason that many residents didn't welcome more police officers, even if they did represent a change in leadership and hopefully less corruption.

The question of more or less policing, and Yessica's navigation of it, are characteristic of the *villa*'s in-between status; it is both informal and formal, unregulated and regulated, official and unofficial, legal and illegal. Another pair of stories in the collection demonstrates this duality perfectly. The first piece, written by a woman named

Sofia, describes the pollution of the Riachuelo, and how a pleasant waterway²⁷ became a garbage dump, “from which the people who live around it are sickened by various illnesses.” The second piece, written by Marta, describes how neighbors worked together to transform the deserted dump where they lived to a neighborhood, including not only cleaning up, but working together to purchase and install poles for electricity and cable. In the first story, Sofia laments neighbors’ lack of care for their surroundings and, by extension, for each other. Marta’s story, however, emphasizes an instance where neighbors came together to solve significant problems in their immediate surroundings. In both stories, however, the state is almost totally absent.²⁸ Both stories, in the end, describe the same larger context that Yessica, Juana, Gladys, Andrés and so many others lamented: the precarious condition of living in a contaminated, dirty, dangerous place all but forgotten by the rest of the city.

NEOLIBERAL VILLA 21-24

In some ways, it is obvious that the status quo is neoliberalism. We know that neoliberalism was implemented in Argentina via the last military dictatorship, and that it has taken particular forms there over the ensuing decades. As defined by David Harvey (2005),

²⁷ Contrary to the story however, the Riachuelo was contaminated by industry long before the memory of those living there today.

²⁸ Sofia’s story makes mention of the government’s brief and ineffective attempt to clean up the waterway: “the government promised that they were going to clean it, and they tried. But they never finished.”

Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework to appropriate such practices. ... If markets do not exist (in areas such as land, water, education, health care, social security, or environmental pollution) then they must be created, by state action if necessary. (P. 2)

Neoliberalism, as an entwined system of economic markets, political governance, and ideology, is responsible for the creation of a significant underclass as prior existing forms of state welfare and support relied upon by the working class dry up. Simultaneous to this, as people get poorer, there exist fewer services and remedies to alleviate their poverty.

One of neoliberalism's many creations is the slum or shantytown, which, while certainly not a 20th or 21st century invention, has certain contemporary dimensions. Most particularly, Davis (2006) highlights their extraordinary growth in his book *Planet of Slums*. Davis argues that in the twenty-first century, the pull of the urban industrial center has been reversed. People are no longer *drawn to the city* but rather being *pushed from the countryside* by a "world agrarian crisis" with "capital-intensive countrysides and labor-intensive deindustrialized cities," "in spite of [cities'] stagnant or negative economic growth, and without necessary investment in new infrastructure, educational facilities or public-health systems" (p. 16). These "capital-intensive countrysides" and

“labor-intensive deindustrialized cities” are the precise results of the market creation described above by Harvey.

Davis offers the following “classical definition” of a slum: “characterized by overcrowding, poor or informal housing, inadequate access to safe water and sanitation, and insecurity of tenure” (2006: 23). To this, based on my experiences and knowledge of Buenos Aires’ Villa 21-24 I’d add that the shantytown in particular represents the reflection of neoliberal forms of disinvestment in the underclass and poverty management. The *villas miserias* in Buenos Aires are notable for their special arrangement of both physical and social space, arrangements which represent the state’s noticeable absence (in the provision of sanitation services, infrastructure, and regulation) but also the state’s presence (the dramatically increased policing of the Villa 21-24 and its surrounding neighborhoods for example).

Neoliberal Argentina

Of course, neoliberalism specifically in Argentina has been theorized too. Much research has focused on neoliberalism as a contributing factor to the crisis in 2001 and widespread impoverishment that spurred popular uprisings (Barrientos and Isaía 2011; Giarracca 2001; Pacheco 2010; Schuster et al. 2005). Svampa (2005) especially highlights the role neoliberalism has played in the increasing inequality in Argentina beginning with the installation of the last dictatorship in 1976. Other work, notably Alarcón’s *Cuando Me Muera Quiero que Me Toquen Cumbia* (2012) and Auyero’s

Flammable (Auyero and Swistún 2009) and *La Violencia en los Margenes* (Auyero and Bertí 2013), explores the violence, “environmental suffering,” and ambiguous relationship to the police in more detail than I have been able to do here.

Here I would like, however, to contextualize student-activists’ descriptions of the *villa* with the aid of recent social scientific research. According to Bozzola et al. (2013), the intensity of the crowding in the Villa 21-24 has seen a dramatic increase quite recently. The *villa* is one of the fastest growing areas of the city as a whole²⁹, but the population growth in the *villa* in the last decade has been especially notable. Between the 2001 and 2010 censuses, the population in the Villa 21-24 approximately doubled to a total of 31,066 inhabitants. The pictures in Figure 2 show a clear illustration of the effect this population growth has had on the density of the *villa*, especially when we compare the 2004 and 2009 maps. This increase in density drives stories like the ones Gladys tells about difficulty finding adequate housing and conflict and competition over space.

In addition to simple population growth, Bozzola et al. (2013) also found that 21% of *villa* residents live in rented housing like Gladys and Juana, while 16% own their houses but not the land they are built on, and another 58% own their homes and the land they live on. The status, of course, of such ownership is murky within the *villa*, where any land that is owned has been purchased after it was settled (at least by the community if not the individual) rather than before. Bozzola et al. (2013) chronicle the multiple attempts of the city government to “officialize” various parts of the *villa*, showing how

²⁹ The population of Buenos Aires itself has remained more or less constant at 3 million within the official city limits for the last 60 years.

Figure 2. Population Growth in the Villa 21-24, 1940 to 2009³⁰



³⁰ Map Source: Website of the City of Buenos Aires (<http://mapa.buenosaires.gob.ar/>)

such attempts have left scattered and confusing patterns of land ownership and title status throughout the *villa*. Firstly the state's attitude has been characterized by a schizophrenic back and forth between the desire to eradicate the *villa* entirely (especially during the last dictatorship) and the desire to regularize the parts of the *villa* considered habitable. Officialization has at various points brought with it streetlights, street pavement, sanitation systems, and especially regulation of land ownership to certain neighborhoods within the *villa*. However, the authors argue that no such project has ever been completed, leaving a trail of uneven progress across the *villa* as a whole. Additionally, such projects have also been accompanied by complementary projects to relocate residents from the most precarious and uninhabitable parts of the *villa* (such as the shacks where Liz lives that we visited). The relocation projects, though, seem to have been used concurrently as cover for the state to attempt to relocate residents from more habitable parts of the *villa* as well. To make matters worse, the failure to complete all such projects has left an even more confusing and convoluted pattern of property ownership and status throughout the *villa*.

CONCLUSION

Bozzola et al. (2013) argue that the *villas* in Buenos Aires were known exclusively as *villas de emergencia* (emergency villages rather than misery villages) until the 1950s when the term *villa miseria* was introduced by a popular novel. Indeed, they

argue that for most of their existence the *villas* were an indicator of the expected prosperity of the city rather than of poverty. They elaborate:

In this period [Perón's first presidency, 1946-1955], the population of the Capital was consolidated into the three million inhabitants that it has retained until the present, and the first and second rungs of Greater Buenos Aires were populated, with migration coming from the interior of the country and bordering countries. Those who didn't gain access to public housing plans or renting increased the number of and population in the *villas de emergencia*. The process of formation and growth of the *villas*, more than an indicator of poverty, should be read in its beginnings as an expression of the expectation of social mobility that the city and its employment offerings generated. For these years, the *villas* were a solution with a transitory character, transformed into a permanent housing destination beginning in 1980. (P. 2)³¹

Clearly, based on residents' descriptions, the *villa* in 2011 was no longer seen by most as a temporary necessity. Instead, it was experienced as a place where people were, in most cases, stuck. As we saw above, even Juana, who viewed her residence in the *villa* as temporary, doubted the truth of her conviction.

The students at the people's high school came to the school as an attempt to escape from and change the reality of their daily lives. The *villa miseria*, as I've argued here, was an overarching factor of their lives that shaped the way the students experienced the daily precarity and indignity of neoliberalism. Tacitly sanctioned and simultaneously illegally settled; plagued by "trigger happy" police officers but abandoned and inaccessible to emergency vehicles; taken over and squatted but unevenly layered

³¹ Translation mine.

with property titles; reliant on collective self-organization for sanitation and electricity but totally lacking neighborly trust; the *villa* is a contradictory place. In the *villa*'s contradictions, we can see the harmful contradictions of neoliberalism itself. Abandoned by the state, residents are harassed by the state's over-zealous interest in resettlement. Invited (or pushed) to Argentina for work by free market economics, migrants are discriminated against and confined.³² Residing in the middle of explosive population growth, students' present status quo is neoliberalism in some of its harshest garb: precarity and violence. In the rest of the dissertation, I show how the people's high school attempts to intervene in this status quo, and the ways in which it succeeds.

³² The population of *villa* is 45.82% of foreign-origin, compared to 13.21% of the city's total population (Bozzola et al. 2013).

Chapter 5: Peronism, Dictatorship, and Resistance: A Brief History of

Neoliberalism in Argentina

The people's high school can only be understood in its larger social and historical context. Beyond the immediate surroundings of the *villa*, neoliberalism has a longer history in Argentina. The history of the physical violence of state terror is tied to the economic and social violence of neoliberalism. These twin arms of neoliberalism, however, are also inextricably tied to a long history of popular resistance and a tradition of activism.

CONTOURS OF HISTORY: PERONISM AND DICTATORSHIP

One of the most iconic images of activism (and maybe politics in general) in Argentina is that of the *descamisados* (shirtless) filling the Plaza de Mayo in support of Colonel Juan Domingo Perón. On October 17, 1945, masses of working class men flooded the plaza in front of the presidential palace demanding the release of Perón from imprisonment and his reinstatement as Minister of Labor. Perón was beholden to the working classes for his power base, and they were, in turn, loyal to him. The moment inaugurated the dichotomy that would govern politics in Argentina for the next 60 years: *Peronista* or *anti-Peronista*. Most significantly, Peronism continues to be the main site of working-class-identified politics. It also includes substantial elements of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and economic redistribution.

Perhaps the most important event, however, in modern Argentine history is the last period of dictatorship. Although Argentina has undergone several transitions between democracy, military dictatorship, and autocratic civilian leadership throughout the twentieth century, 1976 to 1983 exceeded all events prior and since in its level of repression, violence, and everyday horror. The dictatorship was known officially as the Proceso (short for “Process of National Reorganization”) and perpetrated the internationally infamous “Dirty War” against its own citizens. During this epoch Argentina was ruled by a military junta with four different generals serving as head of state in the seven year time span. Such a period of state terror, in which tens of thousands of citizens were tortured, kidnapped, raped, murdered, and disappeared, has had inestimable lasting effects on the society.

The dictatorship particularly targeted leftist activism. The military coup d’état that ushered in the Proceso on March 24, 1976, was itself justified, in part, as a necessary response to radical leftist guerrillas, who had been increasingly active since 1970. The Peronist Montoneros, the more well-remembered of the guerrillas and a term still in common use in contemporary Argentine politics, targeted both the military as well as more conservative Peronists, especially the leadership of the highly bureaucratized labor unions. Beginning with the Montonero execution of former President Aramburu in 1970, extreme right wing groups widely understood to be covertly supported by the government began disappearing students and union militants, and torture became a standard police tactic (Rock 1987).

The polarized politics between the guerillas and the military government of the time created an opening for Juan Perón to come back from exile to govern the country. Perón courted the Montoneros and other Peronist leftists to effect his return to the presidency. His short-lived return to office in 1973 ended with his death in 1974, causing renewed political chaos in Argentina. Throughout this period, the disappearances perpetrated by the counterinsurgency Argentine Anticommunist Alliance (Triple A), unofficially associated with the federal police, against young professionals, students, leftists intellectuals, and others continued to escalate. By 1975, the military was waging a full-scale war against the guerillas, and by 1976, support for the president, Isabel Perón, was weak enough that the Army judged the time right for a full-fledged coup d'état.

The dictatorship is now perhaps best known for the tactic of “disappearances,” and the estimated 30,000 victims of this and other terroristic methods of repression. Developed in the Southern Cone in this period, “disappeared” people were kidnapped out of their homes or off the street by paramilitary squads, with no traces left of them in the police or court records. Some eventually re-appeared, but most of them were murdered and their bodies were dumped by the police and military apparatus.

The dictatorship is known for its repression of activism, but this period of time is also one in which many activists memorialize the brave and historic acts of resistance. One such moment remembered by activists is Rodolfo Walsh's (1977) “Open Letter to the Dictatorship,” which Walsh sent abroad on the first anniversary of the coup d'état detailing the crimes against the population. Walsh was murdered shortly after the letter

was mailed. Today at marches and other activist events activists still cry, “¡30 mil *compañeros desaparecidos-detenidos en la lucha! ¡Presente! ¡Ahora y siempre!*” (“30 thousand *compañeros* disappeared-detained in the struggle! Present! Now and always!”)

The *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo), an activist group that still looms large in contemporary Argentine politics (Borland 2006), was founded in 1977. In fact, the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* is perhaps one of the best known human rights groups in Latin America. The *Madres* first met each other as they sought information in government offices about the whereabouts of their children who had been kidnapped by the military regime during the Dirty War. “Soon after,” Bosco (2006) narrates,

the Madres decided to meet weekly in the Plaza de Mayo in downtown Buenos Aires [a central location near government offices] to exchange the meager information they had been collecting in police stations and military facilities. The Madres’ first meetings were not meant to be public demonstrations but they began functioning as such once the police threatened the women with arrests for loitering. This forced the Madres to begin walking, many times on the perimeter of the square to avoid being arrested. Such was the origin of the Madres’ weekly marches that were to become their signature public display of activism and mobilization. (P. 348)

Before long, the women institutionalized themselves as a movement, and women all over Argentina began forming chapters of the organizations and marching around the plazas in their cities.

As they began marching in front of the presidential palace to protest the disappearance of their children, the *Madres* were very effective in forcing a public debate

about the tactics of the regime into the open. They defined the victims as not only those who were physically disappeared, but also those in society who had lost children, friends, and relatives, while the perpetrators were the military juntas who governed during the dictatorship, and, to a lesser extent, the ordinary Argentines who were willing to remain silent about the violence.

In 1983, with the increasing protests from the *Madres* and others, combined with the devastating failure of the Falklands' War (known in Argentina as the Malvinas' War), the military government fell. Jorge Rafael Videla, the first leader of the Proceso and perhaps the most notorious, was sentenced to life in prison in the 1980s during the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín, the first democratically elected president after the end of the dictatorship. He was pardoned, however, by the next president, Carlos Menem, after serving five years. In 2006, under President Néstor Kirchner, a judge ruled Menem's pardon illegal and Videla was sent back to prison.

In terms of its contemporary impact, then, it is significant that the Dirty War was not simply a period of intense political repression, but was specifically justified, consolidated, and tolerated in response to leftist activism. The current period of social movement mobilization is clearly shaped by both the lasting fear of state repression and by a clear and visceral understanding of the need to question and challenge state authority and power. Contemporary politics, too, are shaped by this legacy as political leaders are evaluated in part by their response to perpetrators (e.g., recently deceased President

Néstor Kirchner's reimprisonment of Videla after his release under the tenure of neoliberal President Carlos Menem).

NEOLIBERALISM FROM THE '70S TO THE '90S

In 1976, when the military officially overthrew the constitutional government in Argentina, it did so with the tacit and sometimes explicit support of the United States. Like so many other dictatorships in Latin America, this one was right wing, pro-capitalist, and heavily supported by the neighbor to the north as part of a supposed attempt to suppress communist and socialist influences in Latin America. The junta, part of the notorious Operation Condor, earned its U.S. support through the implementation of neoliberal policies supporting upper class and neocolonial interests.

Peronism, while not socialist, promoted a fairly high standard of living among the working class and drew on redistributive rhetoric. The period of dictatorship, however, ushered in an era of harsh neoliberalism in stark contrast to Peronist economic policies. These neoliberal policies (for example, widespread privatization of public resources), once implemented via military force, remained in place throughout the 1980s and 1990s, until the crisis in 2001. Throughout the post-dictatorship 1980s and especially the 1990s, however, Argentina implemented IMF-recommended structural adjustment policies which eventually devastated the lower classes (Sutton 2010).

By the late 90s, what seemed to be left of Argentina's famous *descamisados* were the Peronists in power: Carlos Menem, a wealthy and tanned man known for vacationing

on beaches with supermodels while Argentina became an example *par excellence* of the failure of Bretton Woods institutions. Meanwhile, in working class neighborhoods, politicians like Menem used clientelism to maintain support.

Pervasive throughout this period was a sense of Argentine exceptionalism where Argentina was imagined as a white, developed outpost of the First World within the indigenous, backward South American continent (Aranda 2010; Kaminsky 2009; Sutton 2010). Grimson and Kessler (2005) highlight that

the way Argentina fit itself into the increasingly globalized world that opened up in the late 1980s, as well as the way specific Washington Consensus policies were adopted ... grew, in large part, out of the traditional way Argentines had imagined themselves and their country in the world. Argentina had convinced itself and at least part of the rest of the world that it was a European enclave in Latin America. (P. 3)

Using measures of poverty, unemployment, and racial and ethnic diversity, Grimson and Kessler illustrate that Argentina is no more or less European than other Latin American countries and argue that this sense of exceptionalism is inaccurate. While the larger purpose of the book is to contribute to the literature on globalization and neoliberal economic policies, the section of the book that deals most directly with the social responses to the economic crash aims to show that “the belief that neoliberal reform was passively accepted in Argentina is as shortsighted as the view of a ‘red Argentina’ where the neoliberal consensus turned into a massive struggle against globalization in the blink of an eye” (p. 20). To this end, the chapter on “social responses to the crisis” details the different popular movements and responses and their roots in Argentina, including

sections on the history of the *ollas populares* (neighborhood soup kitchens), the rise of the barter clubs in early 2002 (*trueque*), the development of the *piquetero* movement, and the factory takeovers organized by laid off workers. The overarching point is to demonstrate the breadth of activism that has been generated in Argentina in response to the precipitous economic decline of the 1990s as well as to contextualize this activism in a “country with a long associative tradition” (p. 146), hearkening back at least to the *descamisados* in the plaza in 1945.

By 1996, the rising unemployment and poverty caused by these policies lead to sporadic uprisings and efforts against, especially, privatization. Auyero (2003) details the first *piquete* at Cutral-có in the wake of the privatization of the oil manufacturer YPF where community members blocked the highway for seven days until they gained the ability to meet with the provincial governor. The *piquete* is adopted more widely as a tactic, and in fact, there are hundreds each year after 1997 around the country (Garay 2007). With the adoption of the *piquete* seems to come direct participation from neighborhood folks that defies control of existing organizations in the community. Beyond that, encampments like the one at Cutral-có require some principles of organization to determine when and how people are allowed to pass through, how to distribute food, etc.

The dictatorship still casts a long shadow over Argentina. It ushered in neoliberalism, and left significant social scars. This history is deeply intertwined with activists’ practice and understanding of politics, protests, and organizing.

CRISIS, CRASH, AND EXPLOSION

By December 2001, the neoliberal model had collapsed and the Argentine economy was in a near freefall. To stop runs on banks, then-President De la Rúa ordered a freeze on bank accounts, dubbed the “*corralito*.” This policy was followed by the end of the fixed one dollar to one peso exchange rate, causing a serious crisis among the middle classes, added to the existing crisis of unemployment and poverty among the working and lower classes.

The protests were the culmination of a confluence of factors, and a sign that the economic crisis of Argentina’s neoliberal 90s had finally devastated the middle class in what has become an emblematic case of pauperization. The *piqueteros* from some of Argentina’s poorest neighborhoods, who had been experimenting nationally with roadblock tactics to demand subsistence in the form of both direct food aid as well as government subsidies since 1996, were joined in the streets by middle class *ahorristas* (savers) who were outraged by the virtual destruction of their savings accounts earlier in the month as one-to-one peso-to-dollar equivalency was dropped. On December 19, 2001, crowds banging on pots and pans in front of the famous “Pink House” chanted, “*Que se vayan todos*,” meaning “they all must go,” and they were successful in forcing one president after another out of office. On Dec 20, 2001, the protests exploded and turned strongly against the national government when the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, now grandmotherly women famous for having successfully confronted Argentina’s last

brutal dictatorship, were attacked by mounted policeman on live television. In total, five presidents sat in the office over a two week period. Thirty-nine people were killed by police repression, raising questions about the status of democracy less than twenty years after the end of the last military dictatorship.

By May 2002, unemployment had risen to 21.5 percent and the poverty level at the end of 2002 was 58 percent (Sutton 2010). It would be hard to overestimate the depth of poverty and desperation felt throughout Argentina in those years. In a conversation that took place in 2009 about the relative scarcity of stray dogs in Buenos Aires compared to those in Santiago, a friend of mine said wryly, only half-joking: “We ate all of ours in 2001.”

The numbers are debated, but by all accounts this period saw an enormous amount of protest activity. Epstein (2006) cites 2,336 roadblocks for 2002, although Schuster and colleagues (2007) cite only 319 protests of any kind in Argentina. Using a data set she constructed from two national newspapers, 1996-2003, Garay argues, however, that the unemployment rate, the poverty rate, and the type of economic period for each year 1993 through 2003 “do not successfully account for the emergence of and variation in protest over time, as different levels of protest correspond to similar levels of poverty and unemployment and comparable economic conditions” (p. 309), but in total she cites 394 total protests by unemployed people in 7 years. Others have highlighted the feeling that it was if in December 2001 the last dictatorship finally ended as the fear dissipated and people were once again in the streets (Barrientos and Isaía 2011).

It was in this environment that Argentina became something of a laboratory for experiments in egalitarian social change. I described the MTDs in Chapter 1, but new movements also took the forms of neighborhood assemblies, recovered factories, and barter clubs. Pearson (2003) details the development of barter networks (*trueques*) in Argentina as a coping mechanism that functions differently for the middle and lower classes. She reports that the phenomenon of barter markets began before the crisis of 2001-2002, and had gained considerable steam by the late 1990s, when there were more than 150 clubs operating throughout the nation. The *trueques* attracted the participation of a large number of Argentines, but Pearson finds that there were a range of understandings and feelings about what participation in the barter markets meant. In Pearson's interviews with the founders of the *Red Global de Trueque* (Global Barter Network), the founders spoke about striving to create equality and opportunity. One of them stated, "We are inserting equality into the circulation of money – This is the main contribution the network can make to the world ... having this integrated attitude is the best we can do for peace, for the development of social networks, for the development of democracy" (p. 222). Participants, however, had varying reasons for participating in the *trueques*. While some embraced the radical politics, Pearson found that others were "motivated directly by economic need" (p. 222). And while some participants stated that the markets gave them dignity, others stated that they were ashamed and felt degraded by participation in the barter market. Pearson demonstrates how the barter markets provide the poor, including the middle class "new poor," "with a livelihood [and] also with the

opportunity to recover their dignity” (Tedesco 2003, 168). Pearson’s analysis of the barter markets falls short of detailing why some participants might find the markets politically empowering while others might find them demeaning (like for example, class origins).

Neighborhood assemblies were called by residents all over the city of Buenos Aires. Cardboard signs and chalk messages signaled meeting times in parks and intersections as neighbors got together to voice their grievances and hopes for the future. Participants in the assemblies described the power of meeting one’s neighbors and collectively solving problems in a neoliberal context (Di Marco et al. 2003). While the neighborhood assemblies were major sites for experimentation with consensus (analyzed in more detail in Chapter 7), they were more short-lived than the other new forms of organization. Many of the assemblies were destroyed when activists from political parties attempted to co-opt the ad-hoc and consensus-based nature of the assemblies for existing party line objectives (Barrientos and Isaía 2011; Sitrin 2006). Participants were driven away, and almost all of the assemblies died within a few years facing lack of participation and energy.

One other major sector of the social activism was the *fábricas recuperadas* (recovered factories). While factory take-overs are not completely unique to Argentina, the sheer size of the phenomenon is remarkable (lavaca collective 2007). A factory “recovery” is when workers remain in a workplace after it has been closed down due to the economic crisis and instead re-open the business as a cooperative, often after an

intense struggle with the property owners and the police. The recovered factories, however, like the MTDs, represent a spectrum of organizational practices. Rebón and Salgado (2008) argue that only some of the *fábricas recuperadas* use work arrangements that embody horizontal practices and state that many recovered factories replicate a traditional hierarchical notion of management, if not a capitalist single-owner model. Hudson (2011) and Lavaca (2007) both describe some of the many struggles the factories have faced in their attempts to self-organize and to remain viable businesses, while simultaneously struggling to become legal owners.

NEW POLITICS

The movements that swept Argentina in the early 2000s were not only new in form, but they circulated relatively new ideas about politics as well. Galafassi (2003) sees the meaning of December 2001 in the fact that “the notion of representative democracy has reached a crisis point for the first time in relatively massive form” (p. 393). For Galafassi the slogan “*que se vayan todos*” embodied the frustration with democratic representation and career politicians, and was thus followed by the emergence of attempts to develop a new form of politics, exemplified in popular (neighborhood) assemblies, reclaimed factories, and the unemployed workers movement. These movements represent “an attempt of critical reflection to revalue the community notions of democracy in accordance with a participative-inclusive democracy” (p. 393). Galafassi emphasizes the unemployed workers’ organizations’ belief that it is not enough “simply to protest and

resist” (p. 395) government action and the effects of the crisis, and searches out the potential move toward “inclusive democracy” that is represented in these movements. With Carassai (2007), Galafassi admits, however, that most of those who initially challenged the legitimacy of representative democracy “returned somehow to the apathy of the last decade,” while only those “who have been most critical of the dominant system ... continue to support some form of direct democracy” (p. 393).

Scholars and activists alike have been divided as to the purpose and efficacy of the social movements that have arisen in Argentina since 1996. Some, like Jonas Wolff (2007), see in horizontalism and its related tendencies a disappointing failure to transcend the local in favor of broader social change, especially in a context of mass mobilization. Others, however, like Ana Dinerstein (2003a), see the local as the inescapable starting point for a new political movement, one based on “counterpower” (Dinerstein 2003b, Holloway 2005). Grimson and Kessler (2005) argue that the movements that used active consensus for decision-making and eschewed all forms of hierarchy were rooted in historical community practices and the country’s “long associative tradition,” but Delamata (2004) states that the turn to horizontalism in the late 1990s marked a distinct turn from the Peronist—and clientelist—model of labor union and political party activism which had preceded it. Many analysts see these movements in Argentina as an attempt to develop a new form of politics (e.g., Colectivo Situaciones 2002).

One major question is how the *piquetes* institutionalized into MTDs. Delamata (2004) offers a rich analytical description of the unemployed workers movements and

how different sectors of the movement operated in this early period. She argues that the *piquetes* represent not only a physical action but also “new political territories” (p. 22). Her paper gives the background as to how Argentine politics, dominated by Peronism prior to the late 1990s, was transformed by the movement of unemployed workers and the economic crisis. Delamata focuses though on how the “modes of action” and practices of the various *piquetero* organizations represent this transformation of politics in Argentina. Delamata’s most significant contribution to the literature on these movements is her assertion that although different factions of the movement of unemployed workers have different strategies and goals, there are organizational commonalities beyond the membership base and blockade tactic. Her argument is that the *piqueteros* broadened their goals “from merely fighting for jobs” by “open[ing] up new channels of communication with the state and displac[ing] municipal authorities and local political networks from the main bargaining arenas” (p. 8). Delamata breaks the unemployed workers’ organizations into three types similar to those used by other scholars (e.g., Svampa and Pereyra 2003; Epstein 2006), based upon their relationship to existing political structures, internal practices, and their goals. Delamata states that each organization is internally governed by participatory decision-making in assemblies, even as this strategy carries different meanings for different groups. Thus, the common organizational structure belies a new form of participatory politics. In Delamata’s classification scheme, a *piquetero* group could be neo-populist or it could pursue other

political goals, like the “radical autonomous post-Marxist” or alliances with labor unions, even though all groups use the same participatory politics in their organizations.

Auyero (2003) points to the series of micro-decisions that lead to an individual’s decision to participate in a roadblock or other contentious politics. In the same way, his study points to the series of events that lead to the formation of a *piquetero* identity at the piquete in Cutral-có in 1996, an identity that became salient all over Argentina. The roadblock was initiated by politicians in Cutral-có, who tried to take advantage of public anger about the withdrawal of a proposal to build a fertilizer plant in the city to orchestrate a political maneuver. However, soon “the very dynamic of the event pushes that claim [to reinstate the project] to the background, so much so that ... picketers hardly mention the plant” (p. 70). What happened, says Auyero, is that

the roar of the crowd begins to concentrate in the demarcation of boundaries between “us,” the picketers and the people, and “them,” the politicians [M]uch of what goes on during the protest begins to revolve around the very self-understanding of protesters ... so much so that in the collective experience of *la pueblada*, the definition of who the picketers are and what the protest is about takes precedence over their actual claims. (P. 70)

The formation of a *piquetero* identity then becomes the first step toward wider politicization and social change project. Svampa and Pereyra also content that there is an “important continuity between the work realized on the highway and the work effectively carried to its completion in the neighborhoods”³³ (2003: 199).

³³ Translation mine.

Although community self-organizing is at the heart of the MTDs and, at least in the beginning, some form of horizontalism was a founding principle, there is ideological diversity among the movements (Mason-Deese 2012). While the MTDs all arose at a particular moment in Argentine political history with similar goals, they are functionally quite heterogeneous in their ideologies. Some MTDs are Marxist or revolutionary in their orientation, while others remain firmly anti-political party and horizontal, embracing consensus models of decision-making and refusing to form an organizational hierarchy. Still others have reverted to a more conventional clientelist style of organizing, in large part as a result of the Argentine government's system of using MTDs to distribute the *planes sociales* (literally "social plans"). Following the outbreak of *piquetes* around Argentina, multiple *planes sociales* disbursing money for certain work-like activities were implemented as a form of welfare. Many of these are administered by MTDs and other grassroots organizations.

Also important to note is the overwhelmingly female composition of most MTDs. Borland and Sutton (2007) have even pointed to a "feminization of resistance" precipitated by the crisis. While this trend has clearly intensified in the last decade, it is not unrelated to the history of women's activism in Argentina more broadly. There is a long tradition of specifically feminist activism, as well as women's involvement in Peronist or other populist politics, and of course women's activism against the repressive dictatorship. A key issue in the annual "national encounter of women" has been precisely the tension between self-identified feminist activists and members of women's

movements that are often more class- than gender-based (Sternbach et al. 1992; Alvarez et al. 2003; Masson 2007).

2002-2011

On June 26, 2002, two activists, Darío Santillán and Maxi Kosteki, were killed by police repression as part of a blockade at the Puente Pueyrredón. This event is known by many as the “Massacre of Avellaneda” and constituted an important turning point in the trajectory of Argentina’s social movements. The activists were killed when police supposedly confused lethal and non-lethal weapons in the midst of a serious crackdown on the blockade of an important artery into the city of Buenos Aires. The crackdown was ordered by then President Duhalde in an attempt to halt the wave of successful blockades taking place in the months before and after December 2001. Public outrage over the deaths eventually forced Duhalde to call for early elections and step down from the presidency before the end of his term.

In 2003, Néstor Kirchner was elected president after the early elections resulted in what was essentially a 3-way tie. Kirchner’s campaign and later presidency was rooted in support from the working class, unemployed, and the new social movements. His presidency was succeeded in 2007 by that of his wife, Cristina Kirchner, and eventually his death in 2010. Cristina Kirchner was re-elected in 2011 with a huge percentage of the vote. Both presidents have cultivated a relationship to the movements, and have developed a contemporary reformulation of Peronism known as Kirchnerism (Zibechi

2011). This has resulted in a fragmentation of the movements, which were once all united around a common rejection of formal politics (“they all must go!”). Many former MTDs, in fact, are now formally affiliated with Kirchner’s party organization.

Another group of movements who are not affiliated, and, in fact, are “anti-Kirchnerista,” have formed what they call “the independent left.” This coalition refers to movements that are neither affiliated with Kirchnerism nor with any other formal political parties, including the formally socialist and communist parties (who have developed their own MTD-like organizations as well). The National Assembly is a major part of this particular sector of movements.

Currently in Argentina, many of the initiatives that arose during the height of the crisis have either disappeared or changed dramatically. It is no longer common to hear about barter clubs, and only one or two out of more than a hundred neighborhood assemblies in Buenos Aires was still in existence as of December 2011. Just as many of the successful *fábricas recuperadas* have adopted a more traditionally hierarchical structure while maintaining worker ownership, many MTDs have aligned themselves with political parties and adopted more hierarchical vanguardist or representative democratic systems of organization. Some of these decisions seem to be the result of pragmatism, the return to the familiar, and the result of organizational consolidation, while others seem to be the result of direct cooptation by political institutions that reasserted their control over popular mobilization in the years following 2002 (Sitrin 2006).

The everyday context I described in Chapter 4 is connected to the larger political history of Argentina I have briefly reviewed here. Neoliberalism in the Villa 21-24 has some particularly Argentine characteristics, shaped as it is by the earlier fall of Peronism to military dictatorship and the forcible implementation of neoliberal economics as part of an “anti-communist” Cold War project. Once implemented, these neoliberal policies more or less endured until the rupture experienced in December 2001. This rupture was in large part created by the *piquetes* and other social movements I’ve described here. New forms of social movement like unemployed workers movements and recovered factories have been successful in questioning and disrupting the neoliberal regimes of the past. Kirchnerism represents more than a simple repeat of the neoliberal ‘90s, but as we saw in Chapter 4 certain neoliberal realities like those experienced by the residents of the Villa 21-24 still persist. The decade since 2001 has seen both the state and social movements, including the National Assembly, working to define the next phase of economic-political governance in Argentina. This chapter has also placed the people’s high school in the larger social context of other 2001 movements, the contemporary Argentine left, and national politics, a context to which I return in the Conclusion and Epilogue.

Chapter 6: Grading in Utopia

Two of the core structural characteristics of the school are that it is non-hierarchical and that decisions are made in consensus-based assemblies. These characteristics are an important part of what makes the movement utopian, and activists see them as an essential element of their social change project. This chapter describes what these ideals look like in practice on the ground by analyzing the particular example of pedagogy, and especially student evaluation.

Unlike, perhaps, other similar utopian social movements, the people's high school must navigate a context which would seem to be inherently hierarchical: the classroom. One of the most obvious and thorny questions of a non-hierarchical school is grading. The first question is how you award grades, or if you do, and who assigns them. Then, if you decide against grades (which we did), the question quickly becomes how one evaluates how students are doing without grades, and the question, eternally familiar to critical pedagogues everywhere, of how to motivate students without resorting to tools of control or punishment while still recognizing what seems to be a need for structured learning. And again, how to make this a collective task rather than a hierarchical one. Finally, the most consequential question is how to decide who graduates from each year of school into the next one, and eventually, who is awarded a diploma.

This chapter is about how we at the people's high school struggled with and ultimately made these decisions. Here I show not just what non-hierarchy looks like in an educational context, but also provide an extended example of how decisions of

consequence were made in this collective atmosphere. Finally, this chapter describes the development of the collective subject, which is analyzed in Chapter 7.

TEACHERS' MEETINGS

The main site of discussion about evaluation was in the “teachers’ meetings” (formally known as *formación* meetings). These meetings were held once a month, and at them we discussed pedagogical strategies, political theory, and day to day situations of keeping the two schools running³⁴. Although students were hypothetically invited to these meetings, the practice was more uneven. The meetings were almost exclusively full of teachers, and students were never very clearly informed about the time and place. This was, in part, because so much of the teachers’ communication went on via the email listserv, to which few students had access, and also, in part, due to (actual or presumed) lack of interest from the students. After all, they attended school all week with one another and each of us, but since many teachers were busy other weeknights and lived across town, the monthly meetings were one of few opportunities to interact outside of class time.

The teachers’ meetings were held once a month, usually on a Saturday, late morning. Formally, the meetings had no authority over the happenings at either school (both schools of the MTD Barracas met together). Any decisions made at these meetings needed to be brought to the assembly of each school and approved there by both students

³⁴ Recall that “the” people’s high school was technically made up of two schools, as I described briefly in Chapter 1.

and teachers. In practice, this happened in a more informal and unclear way, especially in the case of evaluations. Each monthly meeting had a different broad objective, but usually also included time on the agenda for regular tasks like meeting within our subject groups as well.

The teachers' meetings always felt like marathon sessions of discussion that ranged from the abstract/political (e.g., "What is our political-pedagogical counterhegemonic project?") to the very nitty-gritty (e.g., "Is Maria still attending the school because she has only been to my class once?"). They usually ran for at least four hours and sometimes up to six. This was to some extent because of the slow process of arrival and getting started. Meeting times were often set in the following way: "Let's say 10 o'clock, so people will arrive at 10:30 a.m., and then we can actually be started by 11 o'clock."

The first part of the meeting (from 10 a.m. to 11 a.m. or later) was full of people arriving, hugging, catching up with each other, and boiling water for the many *mates* needed to go around such a large room. Anywhere from 20 to 40 people usually attended the meetings. On more than a few occasions, we formed a large circle as we arrived, and each new arrival would go around the entire thing, kissing each person on the cheek as they passed.³⁵ As we kissed we would either say our names, if we didn't know the other teacher, or give a warmer hug and perhaps have a short conversation with closer

³⁵ Kissing on one cheek is a standard greeting in Argentina, akin to shaking hands in the United States. However, as I explain further in Chapter 7, this is an example of the practice taken to an unusual extreme at the people's high school.

acquaintances. Watching people make this circuit became more incredible as we got closer to starting the meeting, since it began to take a significant amount of time to make it around the entire circle. The meetings were more than a place to hash out pedagogical issues; this was also a space for getting to know each other better and solidifying our feelings of belonging to the movement. The teachers' meetings were also always places where people joked about who was a hippie, how hippie we all were, and who was more "trotskyist [*trosko*]" than who; between these two extremes we worked together to define our collective political identity.³⁶

During the second part of the meeting, we usually discussed a particular topic relevant to the broader political project and our place in it. One meeting, for example, we held a "plenary session" where each of us role-played activists from different parts of the education movement in Buenos Aires. We broke into three groups, and each group was assigned a text written by a sector of the education movement different from our own. Our task was to understand the other groups' critiques of the *bachilleratos populares* and then to present those concerns as our own in a mock plenary held in the second part of the exercise. The group I was assigned to wrestled with the perspective that the *bachilleratos populares* undercut struggles for better public education and absolved the state of responsibility by forming autonomous institutions. This kind of exercise was all the more remarkable given that there were two dozen of us willing to devote two hours (not counting the other sections of the meeting) on a Saturday afternoon to such an exercise.

³⁶ Not unlike Graeber's discussion of how anarchists defined themselves against hippies and punks (2009).

Finally, meetings usually ended with breakout sessions separated by either school location (Barracas or San Telmo) or subject area (Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Math, Language, and Cooperativism), which was intended to allow teachers to work out logistical issues. This part of the meeting was always the most concrete, but still involved a significant share of discussion and hashing out of proposed solutions to issues. Instead of debating the role of the *bachilleratos populares* in a larger struggle for access to education, in this section of the teachers' meetings we might discuss what to do about the repeated cancellation of Friday classes.

MID-YEAR REPORT CARDS

We began discussing mid-year evaluations almost as soon as we began the year, at the end of April. We spent some part (and in some cases almost all) of our monthly meeting discussing this issue in April, May, June, and July. At the same time, we began enacting a process of evaluation in class in early June that lasted through August. The question of evaluation was an issue that required careful consideration of our pedagogical project as well as significant logistical and practical considerations. The school's non-hierarchical structure combined with the less territorial and more disperse nature of the community of teacher-activists presented significant difficulties to coordination. On top of that, our desire to develop process-oriented and emancipatory forms of evaluation created a more time- and work-intensive evaluation process for teachers.

At first, in April, the conversation was fairly open, and took place on a more philosophical level about what the nature of grading should be in this kind of school. What kinds of things should we evaluate? What is the overall purpose of evaluation? How flexible should we be about certain kinds of agreed-upon requirements?

Attendance, for example, is something that teachers and students at both locations had agreed upon as an important factor in how a student is doing. Students often insisted—in assemblies as well as in discussions in class—on attendance as an essential measure of a student’s commitment to their own learning and to the school in general. They stressed that people need to make sacrifices like all the others to come to school regularly, and sometimes expressed some suspicion that it was laziness that kept students home on particular days. Another factor to attendance, though, more persuasive to teachers and mentioned by students as well, is that it is impossible to learn anything from school if you are not at school. Therefore, attendance is easy to pinpoint as a kind of basic proxy for how “well” one is doing in school. If your attendance is poor, you cannot possibly be doing well. On the other hand, as teacher-activists were well aware, student-activists had a variety of extremely good excuses for their difficulties in attending class. Some students had babies during the year, while others faced serious illness personally or in their families. Some students had consistent difficulty getting to the first half of class because their work schedules conflicted with those of the school. Given the obviously pervasive unemployment and difficulty of finding work, no one wanted to insist that school was more important than work. But everyone recognized that such jobs were

unlikely to be long-term and therefore neither were they adequate replacements for school. Then again, even with a valid excuse it hardly seemed to make sense to pass someone who essentially never attended a class.

Another particular concern that came up in these early meetings was how to translate our emphasis on process into evaluative criteria. Teachers mentioned repeatedly wanting evaluations to reflect whether students had “shared in the school’s process.” This was often posed as an alternative to a flat criterion of a specific number of absences. Since we began from a common understanding that the purpose of criteria wasn’t to punish students, we tried to think of more positive enunciations of what we did want to assess.

Repeatedly, the concern that the *bachilleratos populares* not be seen as institutions with no standards which simply awarded diplomas to anyone was voiced. *Compañero* teachers were afraid that our school would simply be seen as an “easy” way to obtain a diploma. Teachers articulated that while they wanted to be flexible, understanding, and supportive, they did not want the diploma to be effectively meaningless but instead wanted passing each year to mean something. The question, then, was what that standard and meaning should be.

Personally, I often was not sure I understood my comrades’ concerns; after all, I felt that the role of popular education should be, at least in part, a critique of the system of credentials and its relationship to employment. Therefore, I did not share their concern that we not be seen as giving away a diploma to “just anybody” but rather felt that would

be appropriate.³⁷ I was in favor of assisting students in taking advantage of the system, since I had no interest in supporting their continued occupational punishment for not having completed high school. On the other hand, I could understand the fear of watering down the activist project at the school by inviting a bunch of people with no desire to commit to anything to simply come register at the beginning of the year and then come back in December to pick up their diplomas. I don't believe the fear was about making the education too "easy" for activists or actual students, but rather one that was about making the education so easy that it ended up being comprised of a bunch of folks not engaging with the organization at all, in any way. This situation, if it came to pass, would perhaps hinder our ability to maintain the school.

This kind of dilemma seems somewhat unique to the marriage of formal institution and popular education at the school. If there were no formal institutional aspects (i.e., no recognized diplomas), there'd be no reward or payoff for such uninterested students and this would not be a concern. Everything would be about an "authentic" experience of learning. On the other hand, this would risk creating a privileged environment, requiring potential participants to forego the possibility of job market benefits within the capitalist economy as a prerequisite for participation. This is a high bar. If indeed we wanted students and non-activists to begin to understand the

³⁷ This view was one that I could see, however, would be unpopular and probably make it seem as if I disagreed more strongly with my comrades than I actually did, so I never voiced it very strongly. This was also in part because I shied away from voicing too many concerns that seemed marginal or particular to me as both a researcher, and a new member of the movement. I was willing to wait and see how others thought of evaluation and to try it the way it had been done previously.

possibility for rejecting these sorts of institutional incentives, it seemed counter-productive to require this stance from the beginning. Furthermore, as many student-activists so eloquently argued when discussing the difference between those who are “there just for the checks”³⁸ and those who are “really activists,” there can be no such distinction. The most “authentic” activists were often those who need the government support. Government support doesn’t need to negate activism, nor do diplomas necessarily negate popular education.

The process for doing evaluations was based on the system of evaluations that had been employed the previous year. Teachers who had been through the process before took the lead, and a few aspects of the evaluations were adopted wholesale from the previous year. The school’s “traditional” criteria of attendance, contents, commitment, and *compañerismo* (explained in more detail later in this chapter) were quickly re-adopted at the April meeting. The idea of having report cards, as well as the refusal to give grades, was also quickly agreed upon, at least by the teachers. The discussion and debates then occurred over the finer points of how to implement these ideas, and especially how to implement more collective rather than individual forms of evaluations. This needed to be balanced both by what had not seemed to work well in previous years, and with what seemed practical or possible given time and other constraints.

The first meeting we held in Barracas (instead of in the other school building in San Telmo) was on a cold, gray, winter day in June. The meeting that day was very long,

³⁸ As I mentioned in Chapter 3, most of the students at the people’s high school received “scholarships” from the state in a similar arrangement.

and the mood was a little bit contentious as we debated again about doing mid-year evaluations and how. It was so chilly, and the classroom we were in, the first-year classroom in Barracas in the old building, was essentially a covered porch with a tin roof and cracked cement floor and almost no heat.

At this point, we had already agreed on the four criteria for evaluation, and we were discussing how we wanted to have teacher evaluations, student self-evaluations, collective evaluations by class, year, and school. We were beginning to realize that this damn report card was going to be 200 pages if we included everything we wanted to in order to make the report card reflect the process rather than the outcome. In June, with four weeks left before vacation, we were also starting to fear that we weren't going to be able to get the report cards done before the mid-year winter break.

After at least an hour of discussion about report cards and evaluation, in our third meeting on the subject, one of the art teachers questioned the idea of having report cards at all. This was approximately our sixth total hour of discussion about this process. Mario spoke up in opposition to the fact that we had been trending toward adding further steps to the process and to the report card in order to balance or correct the less successful aspects of the process from the year before. We did not want to fall into the trap of merely paying lip service to collective evaluation while reinforcing traditional educational models of hierarchical individual evaluation, so we started to discuss including three layers of individual evaluation: one written by the teachers, one written by the student, and one agreed upon by teachers and student after an individual meeting.

In response to concerns from the previous year that the collective portion of the evaluation was never really accomplished, we were discussing making sure that the conversations from the assembly (where we planned to do evaluation for each year as well as for the school as a whole) were typed up and included in the final report card.

“This year we should make sure we systematize our conversations at the assemblies,” said Olga.

“Yeah, we should type that up and put it in the report card too,” agreed Nacho.

“That way the collective evaluation will be part of the report card too,” added another teacher, and many of us nodded.

Murmurs of agreement were heard around the room.

“Isn’t it going to be a little thick though? I mean, if we include the teachers’ evaluation, the self-evaluation, and the agreement for each subject, and then we add the collective evaluation for the cohort and the school...” wondered Carmen.

“I think we should stop fetishizing the report cards,” Mario said, suddenly. He continued, pointing out that if we kept focusing on the report cards we wouldn’t really be re-signifying anything but just placing equal importance on the report card as any other school. One way to interpret Mario’s intervention in the conversation is as a “block,” the term for vetoing a decision in more formal consensus processes. If we had been voting on whether to include a summary of our collective evaluation in the report cards, Mario would have voted against the measure, and if we had been seeking a unanimous vote, we would have lost it. And in fact, it struck me as a little surprising, that Mario spoke up

with such a fully formulated opinion without having participated in the conversation much up to this point. In other words, I did find it surprising that Mario was offering an opinion—a vote, in a sense—without having contributed to the idea’s development up to this point. But what’s important here is that we were not taking a vote, and Mario’s comment, while strong was not taken as a block or as hostile in any way. It was taken as an additional piece of information, another perspective to consider, on our way to coming to a solution that we could all live with. When people responded to Mario, they did so attempting to incorporate and engage with his ideas. They did not simply offer a counterargument as in a debate, but instead attempted to synthesize all points made so far into a proposal that would be workable for all of us. We shifted the focus of our conversation back to what we wanted to get out of the evaluation pedagogically and politically rather than trying to find the perfect way to represent this process on paper.

Finally, after a few more hours of discussion, we arrived at an agreement. We had a plan for how to do the evaluations. As note taker for that meeting, I emailed the following out to the (mostly teachers’) listserv:

Evaluations:

We arrived at an agreement to do everything possible to hand out the report cards to the students before vacation (the last day of the quarter is July 15). The evaluations will consist of 3 parts: evaluation by individual, by year, and by school. The individual evaluations will be by subject, and consist of self-evaluation and evaluation of the student by the teacher (or whatever works for each subject). [Both schools] have assemblies July 6, and we will evaluate ourselves by year and by school on that date, and beginning July 11 will fill in the report cards with the 3 parts.

We talked about the importance of chatting with each student about the evaluation, and in fact there is an agreement since last year to not leave students with the teachers' evaluation without talking about it (in case there are different points of view). So, it's important that we don't hand the report cards out before vacation and talk about the evaluations in August, for example.

The steps to the evaluation that the teachers' group finally agreed to were:

- Each student would have a report card.
- Each subject area (i.e., each pair of teachers) would write an evaluation of how each student was doing in that area, with regard to the criteria of attendance, *compañerismo*, commitment, and contents.
- There would be a spot for each student to write a self-evaluation of how they were doing in that particular class.
- Finally, each team of teachers would meet individually with each student to discuss any discrepancies between the two accounts, and to mutually agree upon plans for students to improve their performance or participation in the school.
- We would also do collective evaluations in each class, as well as at the assembly in each school.

CONFLICT AND EVALUATION IN MY CLASSROOM

If this process sounded overwhelming in theory, it became even more stressful in practice. The process resulted in severe conflicts between Romina and I, and lasted through most of September. On the other hand, by the end of the mid-term evaluation

process I knew the students much better individually, and I felt that the students and I had a much clearer shared understanding of the “political-pedagogical counterhegemonic project” (as one teacher called it) that we were engaged in together each Wednesday in Social Sciences class.

Typical lesson “contents” included worksheets that students worked on in groups and each completed individually, or written summaries of a movie or reading we had done in class. The May Day lesson I described in Chapter 3, for example, asked the students to work together to complete a timeline of important events from the historical narrative. In another class we developed a map of Latin America collectively. We first made a list of the countries in Latin America on the chalkboard, then each student filled in blank maps I’d photocopied for them, and answered some questions about the map (e.g., “what countries border Argentina?”). Finally we got a large piece of paper and Andrés, our perpetual volunteer, drew the blank map of Latin America while other students took turns coloring in the countries. This map hung in our classroom for the rest of the year.

As the year went on and students’ reading comprehension got stronger, we began asking students to self-organize into groups based on their reading ability and read and summarize articles together. To commemorate the *Día del Estudiante* (Students’ Day) and the infamous *Noche de los Lápidas*,³⁹ the advanced reading group read two articles

³⁹ The literal translation is the “Night of the Pencils,” September 16, 1976, when ten high school students in La Plata were kidnapped and tortured (six of them were disappeared) in retaliation for their activism. This night is commemorated every year in Buenos Aires with a school holiday and a large march.

about the massive student mobilizations in Chile happening at the time. The middle group read a longer article about the *Noche de los Lápicos*, with an emphasis on what the students who were disappeared had been struggling for, and more specific analysis of the history. Their reading, for example, included a discussion of the perpetrators of the kidnapping and whether they had been held accountable for their involvement in the crime. Finally the group that self-identified as struggling with reading read a shorter summary and description of the why we commemorate the *Noche de los Lápicos*. Each group wrote a summary of the readings' main points, and was asked to verbally summarize their reading for the rest of the class. We then facilitated a discussion among students about how the readings related to one another. For example, Romina emphasized that the students murdered in 1976 had died fighting for free public transportation for students (who use public transportation to get to and from school), but students in Argentina still do not have access to free transportation to school. Relatedly, students in Chile were struggling for free education, and we discussed whether the students in our class thought that was reasonable or not (they were shocked to learn higher education was not already free in Chile as it is in Argentina). Our evaluation of students' progress in the contents of the class, then, included students ability to read and understand the material (assessed based on our conversations with students as we went around the room while they worked), students' ability to process and summarize what they had read (assessed by the written work), and students' ability to participate in a conversation about broader topics related to the reading.

In our classroom we started talking about how we wanted to mark the midpoint of the year in early June, the last few weeks before our two-week winter break. As part of this process, we had a very successful collective evaluation. We put each of the school's criteria on the chalkboard, and as a group we developed one to three questions for how we might evaluate each of the four criteria. Then we went around the room and answered the questions a) as they applied to us as individuals, and b) as they applied to the classroom as a whole. Students reflected thoughtfully on how we were doing as a group, and we were able to discuss how individual actions affect everyone without calling out any individual students (unless they took responsibility themselves). *Compañero* students were also able to clearly see that their *compañero* teachers weren't clueless as to some of the less studious behavior in the class. Instead, Romina and I were leaving responsibilities to the students rather than trying to force them to focus more during class time.

During winter break, I met with some of the other first-year teachers to review each student's situation across subject areas. Primarily, we wanted to see if there were students attending some classes but not others. Monday and Friday classes inevitably had fewer regular students, but there were other issues too, like Marta who had stopped coming to Cooperativism on Thursdays because she felt that Construction – the workshop offered every other week – was only for men. We used this meeting, like the teachers' meetings, to try to catch each other up on the situation at the school as a whole since,

unlike the students who were there every night, teachers were often out of the loop about goings on outside of our own classroom.

The first class back after winter break I was fairly concerned about how we were going to get through the report card evaluations. Romina and I had not been able to meet up, and had not been able to figure out a way to discuss and then write up an evaluation for each student without canceling our class. Romina and I decided shortly before the beginning of this class to dismiss the students and instead spend the class period working on writing the evaluations together. No sooner had the students left then Pablo and a few others arrived from the *mesa*, the coordinating meeting for the larger MTD. Pablo peeked his head in and expressed surprise that there were no students, and Romina and I told him our plan. Pablo pointed out that Inés had taken the report cards home with her to complete, and had not yet brought them back.

At this point, I admittedly lost it. I don't know what I said exactly, but I remember that it was shrill, and unabashedly annoyed, and Pablo looked shocked while Romina immediately made it clear that I was overreacting, both to me and to Pablo, by telling him that I was "obsessed with the report cards." Her comment made me even angrier, since a significant part of my annoyance was her total lack of concern. Having missed most of the teachers' meetings, Romina had asked me to explain the process to her repeatedly. Each time, she refused to accept my description of the process, until she finally asked Pablo, who told her the same thing I had (during this conversation Pablo also looked at me, as if to ask why I hadn't explained it to her).

One aspect of my frustration was that the dilly-dallying over the report cards, which Mari had emphasized to me must be filled in by hand, which required so many meetings and minutes of class time, only to find the reality so disorganized that the damn things weren't actually anywhere to be found, was finally simply too much for my US self, used to a higher degree of organization and efficiency. The laid-back Argentine attitude around a process that, for me, represented an enormous amount of work was just finally too much.

But this was also a clear turning point in my shift from new teacher looking for instruction and guidance from those more experienced, to a confident activist participant. I was annoyed, and upset, because I had agreed to a process of evaluation that I personally experienced as very lengthy, unwieldy, and difficult. Up to this point, I had worked hard to defer to others because they were more experienced, or because I expected them to have a better idea of what to teach, or because I thought they would know better what the students were capable of or interested in, or because I thought they had a better idea of what the movement was doing. Once things hit this boiling point with Romina, and after many consultations with friends, I realized that she didn't know more than me, in fact, she seemed to know—and care—less. Once I decided to stop holding myself back for her input or defer to her ideas, and more faithfully follow my own instincts and desires as a *genuine* participant in the movement, the school became a great experience for me. Ironically, accepting Romina's disinterest and lack of commitment to the school became a positive turning point.

I suspect the shift I experienced may have been common to other new teachers as well. When I returned the following year in August 2012, I met a new teacher who reminded me in some ways of myself. She was frantically trying to complete her mid-term evaluations and seemed to be experiencing the same frustration with the messy, chaotic, and work-intensive reality of the report cards. She too was foreign (Brazilian), and although she was new to the movement that year she was at the school several nights a week, involved in various committees and already more or less a *militante*. While she struggled with the report cards, Mari and I exchanged knowing smiles, as if to say “that’s just how it is!” The year before, experienced teachers like Pablo and Mari had exchanged this same look over my head, understanding that it would all turn out okay in the end, but I didn’t figure that out until after I completed the evaluation process.

In August 2011, Romina and I held student meetings and worked on the report cards during three successive weeks of classes. During this time, it was tedious to plan the class, because each week we needed to plan activities that the students could work on independently while we were meeting with students individually. This was especially difficult, because as I described in Chapter 3, most lessons were eventually explained on a nearly individual level as we went around the classroom helping and guiding students through the activities. Hence, devising activities that kept the students engaged and that they could accomplish without much help or guidance was a real challenge. We showed a few movies, designed writing activities, and I even brought in a radio interview with a well-known activist academic. The students found the movie too intellectual and hard to

follow, and told me they could not understand a single word of the radio interview. It continues to be a strong comment on their literacy, and the failure of the educational systems they've previously encountered, that they can't understand this stuff and I can. This is especially true when the material was directly discussing their own experiences and the movement that they are participating in.

Meeting with students individually proved to be equally surprising, but much more rewarding. By talking to the students individually, I finally got a sense of who they were as people and why they were involved in the school.

There was, for example, Flor, who seemed to always be angry at us in class. Romina and I even had a debate about whether her displeased expression indicated disapproval with us, or was just a result of her discomfort in the classroom. When I met with her, she revealed an earnest, caring side of her personality that just seemed to have trouble co-existing with the boisterous joking of her friends in the classroom and her own tough outer persona. She was, in fact, devoted to the movement, and was attending the high school at the behest of other *militantes* who encouraged her to take her own self-development more seriously. In fact, Flor ultimately seemed like something of a model *militante* to me. She was the one who opened and closed the building, and her partner and children are often hanging around the movement. Her partner also opened and closed the building frequently, and her son often ran around the school, a little too old for the daycare and yet not one of the adult students, often helping to prepare the evening snack we serve and eat together every night at 7 pm. He seemed to be looking for a role to play.

One of her daughters was often around in the evenings as well, and she seemed to have a developmental disability. At one point, Flor tells me that she is 34 and has 7 children. She always seemed exhausted and a bit grumpy, and yet she gave so much to the movement. This family seemed to be aching for an outlet for their energies and talents, and a way to improve their lives, even if marginally.

Many of the students were young women, and as we had our individual meetings we found that they simply don't speak much in class, they said, because they are shy. After a few more minutes of conversation, however, it becomes clear (at least to me) that the problem was less shyness and more that they had internalized the idea that they don't have anything to share in a classroom. Carla was typical. She attended class almost religiously (rare in an adult school like this one), and always sat with her boyfriend, Antonio. Each time we did group activities (which was often, because of the school's collectivist orientation) Carla and Antonio formed their own group. When we checked in on them, Carla rarely asked a question or offered a contribution, instead smiling shyly and letting Antonio do the talking. In our individual meeting, Carla told us that Antonio is very smart and good at all of the work because he has completed this year of school before, while she still has a lot to learn. By the end of the year, however, it was Carla who finished the year successfully, while Antonio eventually gave up the struggle between his work hours and school attendance.

In the student meetings, we address the four criteria for evaluation (attendance, *compañerismo*, commitment, and contents). Following the lead of more experienced

teachers and especially those who are *militantes* in the movement, we suggested to some students that while they were doing very well in a traditional sense—their attendance was regular and the work they produced was a good reflection of the content we are teaching—that they needed to work harder in the areas of commitment and *compañerismo*. A student who follows each lesson easily and is present nearly every week may still be told that she needs to work much harder on her *compañerismo* or on her commitment to the school as an institution and part of a broader social movement.

This was the case, for example, with Elizabet. Elizabet, one of the few older women in the classroom, always sat at the table in the corner with “the girls.” She was a conscientious student, one of the “*señoras*” who worked hardest to follow the lesson, learn the content, and encourage the other students to remain orderly and hard-working. In her case, we praised her engagement with the class as well as the *compañerismo* she shows by working together with the other students who sit at her table. We pushed her, however, to demonstrate more commitment to the school as a whole, and to the utopian project that it represents. We urged her to speak up at assemblies, to voice her opinion, and to use the conscientious attitude she demonstrates in the narrower confines of the classroom to take some ownership or responsibility for the broader movement project.

END OF YEAR REPORT CARDS

At the end of the year, there was much less discussion of evaluation and how to do them at the teachers’ meetings. This is somewhat ironic, since the end of the year

evaluation held much higher stakes (at least in theory): passing into the next year or not. When we got to the end of the year evaluations, I also personally felt a strong contrast with the mid-year experience. I felt like part of a bigger process, and no longer “obsessed” with doing it all correctly or taking it on myself. It was still problematic that Romina didn’t help me very much with writing up the material for the report cards, but I no longer felt like this meant it was on me. The students who were evaluated at the end of the year were clearly committed to the project of the people’s high school, which hadn’t been as clear at the midpoint. Furthermore, I didn’t struggle to find something positive and constructive to say to anyone. I knew everyone well enough that it was easy to find something positive and maybe even unique about their contribution to the group, even in the case of students who actually did not pass the class. Having this kind of relationship with each student, as well as with the other teachers and the school as a collective, changed my relationship to the task.

Here I include a few sample report card evaluations to give a sense of how, at the end of the year, we implemented the agreed-upon criteria. The first is for a student who did extraordinarily well on most of them:

Ana, since the first quarter you have improved your participation in class, attendance, and commitment to the school! We see a very big change in you; you have more confidence in yourself and you have converted into a *referente* for other students in terms of volunteering. Your work is always well done, and you have a good command of the materials in social sciences. It seems to us that now you can see the importance of the school to everyone as a movement in the neighborhood (beyond the individual importance of the diploma), and our hope for you is that

next year you continue strengthening your commitment to the collective of the school. We congratulate you for everything you have achieved this year!

What makes this evaluation a particularly positive one isn't primarily Ana's performance in class or her improvement in understanding the social sciences. Instead we were especially impressed with Ana's transformation from one of the girls who seemed to hold herself completely apart from the collective project of the school (one of "the girls" I described in Chapter 3), to a *referente*. Throughout the course of the school year, Ana had transformed from a woman who held herself apart from other students and was only interested in her own work (or perhaps helping her sisters) into a woman who often volunteered for collective tasks and who encouraged others to do the same. Simultaneously she shifted from a person who may have quietly said a word or two in class to someone who spoke up forcefully at assemblies and took an active role in resolving problems, although she still did not participate in any movement-led political activities outside of the school.

This evaluation is a good example of how we explained the criteria to students, and of how we applied it with an eye to "the particularity of individual cases," as teachers often insisted in meetings. Ana's evaluation was both in comparison to other students and in comparison to her own attitude and behavior at the beginning of the school year. We referenced her attendance and command of the subject matter, and it was clear that regular presence and mastery of the material were instrumental in both giving her confidence to participate in other ways and in convincing her of the value of the school.

Volunteering then became a solid demonstration of her commitment to the school as such. Finally I think this and the other evaluations are interesting for how they convey the attitude of encouragement at the school.

Obviously it is easier to write a positive and encouraging evaluation like this one for a student who has demonstrated noticeable improvement across all aspects of evaluation. However, evaluations for “worse” students were similarly rich and encouraging. In fact, part of the idea is that students who weren’t showing as much improvement, even those who weren’t recommended to graduate to the next year of schooling, weren’t “bad students.” For example, this is the evaluation we gave a teenage boy whose attendance was extremely inconsistent throughout the entire year:

Jorge — You had a difficult year in the school and in the area of social sciences, especially with attendance. You always contributed something important to the conversation, and you participated a lot. You have a lot of knowledge in the area but you also have a lot to deepen and develop, and it is a shame that you couldn’t complete the make-up process. You demonstrated a huge commitment to the school and a great capacity to exert yourself with your classwork. Our wish for you is that next year you can strengthen your commitment to yourself, to your learning, and to complete your high school diploma, and that you recognize what we know: you are a valuable person. The school waits for you.

Jorge’s situation was opposite that of many students. He was clearly committed to the political project of the school, and his command of the material was relatively strong.

When present, he was one of few students who spoke up confidently and tried to reason out his own opinion on topics we covered. He disappeared, however, for months at a time

and couldn't realistically have been said to have "shared the school's process."

Nonetheless, we gave him an opportunity to graduate to the second year if he came in during the summer and completed a folder of make-up work. We were less interested in his completion of the work than in the commitment this might demonstrate, as we say in the evaluation, to himself.

Sofia's evaluation was similar. An older woman I mentioned in Chapter 4, Sofia attended nearly every class, but at the end of the year she was still almost completely illiterate. Although we (along with several other teachers) had spoken to her about whether or not the high school was appropriate for her at the mid-term evaluation, she continued to come to class in the hopes that sheer attendance would allow her to graduate. To her, we wrote:

Sofia – We congratulate you for excellent attendance and the effort that you sustained for the entire year! We know that a lot of times it is hard for you to be in the class but despite that you always came and you never stopped trying and that is very impressive. Although you continue to have difficulty with the contents in the area, we recognized that you improved a lot, especially with reading. Next year, we hope that you will continue with your struggle against frustration and that you take a more active role seeking help from your fellow students and teachers. You have a very, very strong determination to learn and that is a valuable thing.

When we met with Sofia about this evaluation, despite her persistent attendance, she too agreed that she would not be able to move forward with her class.

There were a few difficulties, however, in the individual meetings. In particular, one student only saw the positive part of the evaluation and not the "needs improvement"

part. Josefina was beaming at the beginning of her meeting, and somewhat smug about her evaluation compared to her sisters'. I was overly harsh with her in reaction, because I felt as though she was still failing to engage the collective nature of the school. I didn't want her not to be proud of her work at the school over the year, but at the same time it did seem to me that she hadn't tried as hard as her sisters and had failed to take other aspects of the evaluation seriously. In my zeal to impress the importance of this upon her, Romina and I weren't on the same page. Romina herself was, at that point, obviously uncommitted to the movement and fairly unconcerned about the commitment and *compañerismo* aspects of the evaluation. All of this led to a fairly difficult and negative meeting with Josefina, where Romina was encouraging and positive while I harped on her shortfalls in other areas. Josefina teared up and never really spoke to me again, although she did return the following year.

At the end of the year, Romina and I wrote evaluations for 22 students who had more or less finished the year. Of these, 17 were recommended to pass the course and the year, 2 were recommended to pass provided they completed some additional tasks, 2 were recommended to pass only if they were able to substantially cover the material on their own, and only Sofia was recommended to repeat the first year at the school or perhaps find a better educational program for her particular needs. The 22 final evaluations we wrote are compared to the 34 we wrote at the middle of the school year, and the more than 50 students who enrolled in the first year in March.

UTOPIANISM IN THE CLASSROOM

At the end of the year, the process was much smoother and overall much better. I felt like part of a collective. Even though Romina was much less help than she had been at the mid-term, I felt like I was one of many doing these evaluations—like I had to do my share of the work but I was not alone. I was not the only one stressing about it, and I was not solely responsible either. I did not have too much power, but I did have an invested role and interest. I felt like part of a team. I understood that I didn't actually have very much individual power or responsibility after all, so I didn't feel the same stress. Each class's evaluations were somewhat related to other class's evaluations, especially because of the question of who would pass and who wouldn't (determined by a group conversation among all the students' teachers), but we also all had ownership in the process and no one determined it for us.⁴⁰

What made the real difference is that I felt like I was part of a group of people (a collective) and I didn't feel so isolated and like I was the only one doing this kind of individual work so the work requirement didn't feel so high. The successful production of the collective subject, analyzed in the following chapter, substantively changed the evaluation process for me and its meaning and my role in it, even though a lot of it was exactly the same (evidenced by the lack of discussion at meetings about how to do it).

⁴⁰ I wish I could say more about how other new teachers dealt with this issue, and I wish I had more observations of how other teachers taught their classes. Unfortunately I don't have systematic observations of classrooms other than my own to be sure; this is in part the result of the feminist ethnographic stance I described in Chapter 1. I specifically did not want to organize systematic, repeated observation of others' classes in the school, since I felt that would violate participants' boundaries and turn activists into objects of ethnography rather than *compañerxs*. I am confident, however, based on my conversations with experienced teachers during both evaluations, that my experience is likely to be a common one.

At the people's high school, we set ourselves the task of adhering to consensus and non-hierarchical principles even in the context of a degree-granting institution. While hierarchy was occasionally difficult to squash in the day-to-day practice of the classroom, some of the trickiest moments to implement our utopian ideals centered around evaluation. Although clearly an imperfect process, the *compañero* students and teachers of the people's high school worked hard to preserve the collective spirit of open discussion as we designed (and constantly refined) our evaluation process. In turn, rather than a barrier to utopianism, evaluation became another moment of elaboration in our "political pedagogical counter hegemonic" experiment and even strengthened our collective commitment to one another.

Chapter 7: Producing the Collective Subject

"We can say that the faithful are not mistaken when they believe in the existence of a moral power to which they are subject and from which they receive what is best in themselves. That power exists, and it is society.... That exaltation is real and really is the product of forces outside of and superior to the individual"

- *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (Durkheim 1995, p. 227)

This chapter advances a new analytic description of how the school, and other spaces like it, bring people together. This chapter has three main arguments. The first is that we—meaning the *compañerxs* of the people’s high school, including myself—were by the end of the 2011 school year part of a “collective subject,” to use Dri’s terms (2007).

This argument requires a few clarifications and specifications. First, the “collective subject,” as used here, means something more specific than simply a generic group of people held together by something in common. As I use it here (and as many activists and philosophers on the left use it [e.g., Colectivo Situaciones 2002; Barrientos and Isaia 2011]), it implies a politicized way of understanding and experiencing social relationships. I elaborate below, but for now I will say that a collective subject is a social group that is characterized by a collective rather than individual orientation to agency and problem-solving; solidarity; mutual respect, trust, and care; self-efficacy; and dignity. The next clarification is that the collective, as such, is an ongoing production. Like an institution, once in existence the collective is in need of constant reproduction in order to continue existing. One aspect of this reproduction is the incorporation of new members.

But as with institutions, reproduction is not only limited to growth or change. A sophisticated understanding of the social world is one in which we look for the ways that we are constantly producing or reproducing our circumstances and structures. This is especially true of the collective, since it is a partially affective product of bonds and relationships of a group of people to one another. Thus I use production, reproduction, and (re)production nearly interchangeably throughout the chapter.

The second argument of this chapter is that the production of the collective is an accomplishment in and of itself in the neoliberal context described by the previous two chapters. The production of the collective is therefore a necessary and core part of the utopian social change project.

Finally, I argue that the collective subject is produced by four major elements: consensus-based decision-making, non-hierarchical structure, *mística*, and everyday collective effervescence. These elements are of equal importance, and they work together to produce the collective subject which I identify here. In an effort to engage the structure/culture debates in the social movement literature, I have split these elements into two categories: organizational-structural elements (consensus-based decision-making and non-hierarchical structure) and affective elements (*mística* and everyday collective effervescence). This schema also makes sense because there is a small amount of overlap between the elements in each category.⁴¹

⁴¹ In other words, consensus and non-hierarchy, while analytically different, are difficult to separate in practice. It's tricky (if not impossible) to practice non-hierarchy with any other form of decision-making, and consensus-based decision-making is likewise improbable in a hierarchical context. Although I theorize

My argument builds on previous literature on utopian social movements, but these analytic categories make a significant departure and advancement. The literature on consensus tends to emphasize consensus on its own or in conjunction with non-hierarchical structure, with very little discussion of the affective relationships that underpin it. Contrary to some of the best literature on utopian social movements however, I argue that consensus and non-hierarchical organization on their own do not produce a collective subject. Instead, my fieldwork implies that there are specific affective elements that are equally crucial and necessary to the production of a collective subject. Reflecting on my experiences at the people's high school, I argue that these affective elements are both powerful in their own right as well as constituting the crucial underpinnings for consensus and non-hierarchy to function. The idea is that all four of the elements I outline here, when taken separately, are necessary but insufficient conditions for the production of a collective subject. When taken together, they work separately and in concert to become necessary and sufficient.

In the general social scientific literature there is a tendency to elaborate on the structural processes of the movements as if consensus and non-hierarchy alone were the key elements to utopian social movements. On the other hand, in the literature specific to 2001 movements in Argentina, there has been a certain amount of engagement with the idea of affective politics and the claim that the main aspect of the movements' change

that non-hierarchy without affective bonds is unlikely to be very successful, it is at least in form possible. Similarly, the two affective elements have much in common with each other but occur at different organizational levels.

from social movements and politics as usual is the emphasis on transforming social relationships. This literature, however, doesn't delve into much analytic depth about how this transformation occurs. My aim here is to build on this work by naming and analyzing two distinct components of the transformation in social relations (in my terms, the production of a collective subject).

My purpose here is not to untie the "means are the ends" theory of utopian social movements, but rather to analytically separate the aspects and elements of this practice. In other words, I do not distinguish between the utopian political project, the collective subject, and the four elements necessary for its production because these things are distinct in empirical reality. In fact, the project of utopianism, as I argued in Chapter 2, is precisely to collapse the future-present-past distinction of linear timelines so that each of these becomes part of one ongoing and constantly changing empirical object.

However, I believe that making analytical distinctions as I am doing allows us to more clearly understand *what* is happening in a utopian social movement. In particular, my aim here is to try to disentangle "what is working when it's working and why." I argue, then, that the "what" in question here is the successful production of the collective subject, and the "why" are the four constituent elements of consensus, non-hierarchical structure, everyday collective effervescence, and the *mística*.

As such, my analysis is relatively unique. Among the literature on utopian social movements in Argentina, the emphasis is placed on an examination of the theories of power at work in such spaces (e.g., Caviasca 2010; Colectivo Situaciones 2002, Dri

2007; Svampa and Pereyra 2003). Sitrin's (2006) work is exemplary in its examination of the political project of horizontalism, and its presentation of the ideology and philosophy of why transformation of micro-level social interaction is crucial. All of these analyses take the affective seriously and are rich in terms of arguing for the importance of a transformation in social relationships, but they provide little in terms of empirical analysis of how this works in practice, and even less on the particular question of why it actually does work. In other words, many have written about why participants organize in assemblies and what they feel is important about this, but few have examined the link between the ideology of such utopian movements, and the constituent elements of the process by which they accomplish these "goals."

In the broader literature on utopian social movements, the structural elements of non-hierarchical organizing and consensus-based decision-making have been emphasized and the affective elements have rarely been examined as equally important to the production of the collective subject. Many studies have implicitly assumed that the collective subject is a direct production of the structure, seeing consensus and non-hierarchical decision-making as the only key aspects of the utopian process.

Graeber (2009), for example, in his extremely detailed study of anarchism and direct action at the 2003 antiglobalization protests in Quebec City, practically reduces anarchist practice to "radically egalitarian forms of organization" (533). At places, it seems that for Graeber, consensus-based organizing is synonymous with the entire means and ends of anti-authoritarianism. Similarly, Polletta (2002) and Maeckelbergh (2009),

by elevating direct democracy itself to the level of the object of empirical analysis, give structures of decision-making far more importance than their “softer” elements.

This is not to say that any of this work is necessarily wrong; as I said this is the best work on utopian social movements. However, I think that by changing our analytic framework we can better understand the necessary and sufficient conditions for such movements to work well. Many of us know, for example, from personal experience if not from social science, that consensus-based structures are not in and of themselves guaranteed to produce a collective subject. My aim in this chapter is to name and explore, based on my fieldwork at the people’s high school, that *je ne sais quoi* that constitutes the rest of the utopian organization.

After elaborating on the collective subject that is formed at the school, this chapter will focus on the elements involved in producing the collective subject within a group of more atomized individuals. I begin with the structural elements, since those have received more treatment in the literature on utopian social movements (e.g., Polletta 2002; Maeckelbergh 2009; Graeber 2009), while the affective elements have rarely been analyzed as an equally important aspect of the political project (important exceptions include Gould 2009 and Summers Effler 2010). I then examine each affective element separately, showing how it demonstrates itself in lived experience as well as explaining the theoretical roots of the analytical categories I am applying. Finally, I bring these elements back together to show how they are mutually reinforcing in their (re)production of the collective.

FROM INDIVIDUALS TO A COLLECTIVE

In Rosabeth Moss Kanter's (1972) book, *Commitment and Community*, she posits the formation of commitment as the central dilemma of any utopian community, arguing that the key difference between successful and unsuccessful communes is "how strongly they built commitment" (p. 64). Indeed the question of whether humans are inclined to socialize with one another or whether they only do so under duress is one that is as old as political theory itself. More recently, social theory has avoided the question of our supposedly inherent desire to rely upon one another as humans, arguing instead that subjectivity is a social construction so indelibly shaped by capitalism, neoliberalism, racism, and sexism that the only thing we can empirically know is how these processes shape our desires and behaviors.⁴²

Neoliberalism in particular is a force that has been identified as one that does its best to create atomized, competitive, "individually responsible," subjects (Harvey 2005). The neoliberal world, at its purest, is one in which "individual success or failures are interpreted on the basis of entrepreneurial ability" (p. 65). The participants at the people's high school, and their social worlds, are no different. In fact, as recent ethnographic work has shown (Auyero and Bertí 2013), the social worlds of many of the activists at the people's high school are characteristic of some of the most violent and brutal manifestations of neoliberalism. As my interviewees described in Chapter 4, life in the

⁴² This perspective is found in so many areas of contemporary sociology, from Foucault to Bourdieu and everywhere in between, that it is difficult to name a few citations.

villa is one of unemployment, dispossession, violence, and marginality on all fronts. With these come fear, distrust, and disrespect between neighbors, family members, and co-workers. Yet, in this chapter I argue that the people's high school succeeds in producing, out of this context, a collective subject. This chapter seeks to explore the puzzle of how the collective subject was made possible in neoliberal circumstances.

In March 2011, the beginning of the school year, participants at the people's high school had very little in common. Although they were all participants, they did not even share a common understanding of or faith in the school's utopian project. As I described in Chapter 3, students and teachers came to the people's high school from a variety of paths and for different reasons. Consider the variety of paths for the 50 or so students who began the first year that year. A significant number of the students in this cohort came in to the school during registration with almost no prior knowledge of either the school or the MTD. These individuals came in to the building, either alone or in small groups, after seeing a sign advertising free completion of the high school diploma. When the school year began, there was hardly a single student among them with interest in the politics or principles of the movement; most of these students had the attitude that they would tolerate the political stuff in order to complete their secondary school educations. Recall, for example, the student in Chapter 3 who asked about the *piqueteros* choice of tactics during our orientation.

Another group of students were introduced to the movement by a friend or family member who was already involved in the school, in the soup kitchen (*comedor*), or in

another of the movement's projects. These students began the year with somewhat more orientation to the school's larger political aims, as most of them were at least aware that the people's high school is part of a *piquetero* organization, but for the most part these students knew little else about the MTD or the school. More significantly, although their path of arrival to the school was through similar networks, their attraction to the school varied widely. Some were attracted specifically to the people's high school as a 'good place run by good people,' while others were simply at a loss as to where else to complete their degrees.⁴³ The type of network connection also varied widely: some new enrollees were recruited by students who had already completed one year of school there, while others were recruited by family members who had simply been to the soup kitchen and noticed information about the school. Thus the strength of their ties to other parts of the movements based on their networks, even within the network-recruited students, varied.

Finally, there were five or so students who enrolled at the people's high school after significant involvement in other aspects of the MTD. These students were deeply aware of how "we" do things "here," and were in most cases more committed to the MTD's political project than necessarily to their own education. To this group of committed activists was added the dozen or so students from the previous years' cohort,

⁴³ As I argued in Chapter 1 the attraction to the school specifically as a place where it is "easy to enroll" is shaped by needs that are deeply raced, classed, and gendered. Thus both groups of students who arrive more apolitically to the school are well-served by the school's political commitments, as it takes specific measures to enable marginalized students to attend that are not taken by either the public or the private adult high schools.

who had been oriented to the school the previous March, had successfully completed the year, and had chosen to return to this particular school. But while some students shared the stated goals of the organization, the majority did not or were still unaware of those goals. Even at the level of organizational goals, students were heterogeneous.

At the same time, many of the teachers were also new and held varied ideas about their commitments as activists at the people's high school. In 2011, about half of the twenty teachers in Barracas were new to the school. Almost all teachers first experience the school through a recruitment session held by a small group of teachers and students who give a broad description of the school and its goals. At the session where I was recruited, it was clear that several prospective volunteers had very little knowledge of the National Assembly's political positions and were primarily interested in lending their skills to "help" the poor. They made reference to previous volunteer activities in poor neighborhoods, and saw potential involvement in the school through a volunteer lens.

Teachers who saw themselves as educational volunteers negotiated their new roles alongside another group of new teachers who saw teaching at the school as a form of consolidating activist identity. This group included my co-teacher Romina, and was composed largely of university students looking for opportunities to put their activist ideals in practice. These students were younger and seemed to be seeking participation in some kind of revolutionary group, but did not necessarily place importance on the differences between the utopian practices of the National Assembly and the more traditional revolutionary politics of other similar projects.

Finally, there were teachers like me. Like a few of the teachers-turned-*militantes* that I interviewed, I came to the people's high school with a clearer understanding of the National Assembly than of the school itself. I went to the recruitment session as a way to hopefully find a role for myself within the National Assembly because I wanted to be involved in its project, but as a middle class person, was not sure where to insert myself in a movement of unemployed workers.

Then there were the 10 or so returning teachers. Unlike returning students, returning teachers were more likely to be firmly committed to both the school and the movement project. While students might return to the school year after year even with some ambivalence about the project because they still see it as a good place to complete their degrees, volunteer teachers are unlikely to continue their participation unless it is intrinsically meaningful.

Layered on top of the variation in goals and assumptions participants bring with them to the school are a variety of differences in social location; class and nationality/ethnicity are particularly salient in this context. Gender and *machismo* do on some occasions become salient, but the school itself was a majority women space. Of the twenty-two students in the first year who finished the year, only two were male; of the twenty or so teachers, ten were male. In terms of class status, *compañero* students were fairly uniform. Unlike the student-activists, teacher-activists came to the school from a variety of class and social locations. Three or four teachers were students at the University of Buenos Aires, and lived nearer the Social Sciences department in the

northern half⁴⁴ of the city. Others lived with their parents, or simply had always lived in these more northern districts of the city. One or two commuted from middle to working class neighborhoods in the city's immediate outskirts, while another group lived in bordering neighborhoods with varying degrees of middle and working class backgrounds. Of the teacher-activists who lived closer to the school, most (including myself) were more strongly identified with the movement and had chosen housing specifically to be near the school and its neighborhood. At this site none of the teachers were graduates of the school because it had not yet graduated a class, but a few teachers at the school's other site were graduates.

Among the teacher-activists in 2011, then, all were from at least one rung up the ladder of social class from the student-activists. Though some of the teachers came from working-class backgrounds, and others, like Laura, were actively rejecting bourgeoisie family and career ideals, none of the teacher-activists lived in the *villa* and none of them faced the same prospect of long-term unemployment and poverty. Of course, the difference in social class between the two groups is almost by definition. Teacher-activists needed to have high school diplomas while student-activists do not, a difference which has strong class overtones. It bears repeating, however, as another lack of shared tie or experience between activists at year's beginning.

⁴⁴ Buenos Aires is well-known to be historically economically segregated between its northern and southern halves; most of the city's wealth is concentrated in the north, and tourists sometimes receive advice from wealthy Argentines not to venture to the city's southern half at all, although the southern side of the city contains many middle class neighborhoods and considerable variation.

In March 2011, the people's high school was anything but a collective subject. Instead it was a collection of individuals, shaped by neoliberalism, participating with different goals and assumptions, and divided by differences of class and ethnicity/nationality. Embarking on the ambitious project of running a school collectively and in the most egalitarian way possible, these individuals shared few preexisting ties. This group was joined by activists returning from the previous year, who were part of a collective with one another. But the new activists didn't just get folded in to this existing collective. Rather, the collective subject, as dynamic and always in production as any other subjectivity, was re-shaped by this process as well. Over the course of the year, this disparate group developed into a collective subject capable of truly shared creation and governance of an educational institution as well as a larger social change project. How do individuals who are, as we saw in previous chapters, extremely marginalized, competitive and mistrustful, semi-literate both literally and politically, lacking in self-confidence, and who have very little in common, come together as a collective of people with shared goals characterized strongly by mutual trust and care for one another?

To some extent, this situation is common to a variety of organizational endeavors. After all, every institution building project is one of defining common aims and common goals among people who previously did not work together. Institutions must seek to either find or create commonality in the form of collective identity. At the people's high school this was in part accomplished through the development of class consciousness as well as building a common activist identity by referencing the larger social movement.

What is particular about this case however, is the creation of a collective subjectivity, not just a shared identity to be drawn upon. In utopian social movements, the extent of the solidarity the institution hopes to create is much deeper. The aims for relationships are quite high; people must not only be able to work together or be neighborly, but they must be willing to trust each person's capacity to make important decisions.

THE COLLECTIVE SUBJECT

In this section, I describe the collective subject as it is produced and reproduced. I do not argue that the collective subject was produced at the people's high school because activists said it was. Rather, my identification and analysis of the collective subject is based upon my own experience as well as sociological observation. I identified the collective subject initially because I felt it; I noticed that when I entered the school I came to expect an atmosphere distinct from any other public space, one characterized by mutual care even among strangers. I looked forward to evenings there as a time when I could simply share with other human beings, and in particular I could share a fundamental set of assumptions about justice, mutual aid, and politics. This section shows the analytic construction of the empirical object.⁴⁵

My description of said object—my claim that at the school we, as activists, became part of a collective subject—is not meant to argue that the collective subject was perfect or that experiences within the school with it were not varied. As a constant

⁴⁵ As suggested by Melucci (1996).

production, the collective subject was constantly threatened by the neoliberal values of the wider world and the lifelong neoliberal habits of its members. In Sitrin's (2006) compilation of interviews with utopian activists in Buenos Aires, participants emphasize over and over that horizontalism is not something that can simply be established. People themselves are complex productions of conflicting social contexts, and cannot simply hope to unlearn or undo deeply seated forms of inequality overnight. This acknowledgment, in fact, is part of the basic reasoning for "processual utopias" (Couton and López 2009): revolution must be constant and ongoing in order to exist at all. The Zapatistas are famous for saying "make the road by walking." The idea of constant revolution implies that the production of the collective subject is ongoing, but its corollary is that failure is also constant and expected. The struggle, then, is constant.

Thus while I highlight in this section the characteristics of the collective subject, I attempt to also juggle the inconsistency and nuance of its existence. Far from being a uniform experience of constant, perfect success, then, the collective subject is an uneven experience. What characterizes it, above all, as existing, is the expectation of its existence. The expectation of members of this collective subject was that this was a space of dignity, respect, self-efficacy, inclusion, sharing, and mutual aid instead of competition, mistrust, helplessness, and marginalization. This shared expectation united participants, and points to the existence of an alternate set of norms. And in my experience, these norms were upheld at the school more often than not.

Some previous work has identified the importance of the collective subject to utopian revolutionary projects. Rubén Dri states that the “creation of the collective subject and of the individual subjects that make up the collective, is the socialist society already underway. We are constructing it simultaneously as we move forward. The new man and the new woman are being born”⁴⁶ (2007:84). Argentine activist philosophers Colectivo Situaciones (2002) also identify the collective subject as a key site of social transformation in their description of the neighborhood assemblies. They argue that the assemblies are “sites of elaboration and thought” which are “about the work of discussion, coordination, and collective thought that is constructed beyond the classic routes of political organization”⁴⁷ (p. 165). They continue, “Assemblies are popular forums where each one comes with their own ideas, concerns, and knowledge, and participates in *a moment of collective elaboration from a heterogeneous point of departure*. The work of setting common premises, of spanning diversity and harmonizing pluralistic—and not always overlapping—expectations constitutes a rich process of politicization that brings thousands of people, many for the first time, to be the protagonists their own destinies”⁴⁸ (p. 165-66).

At the school, this “moment of collective elaboration” becomes a prolonged shared educational and community project, beyond just the moment of assembly. In contrast to the individuals who come to the school at the beginning of their involvement,

⁴⁶ Translation mine.

⁴⁷ Translation mine.

⁴⁸ Translation and emphasis mine.

collective members share mutual goals and are engaged in a common project. While people still of course have individual goals like completing their education, the collective is characterized by the overarching goal of making the school run. Individual aims are now seen as something that happens as part of a group project, not something separate. Because it is almost completely autonomous from the state, the shared stakes and responsibility at the people's high school are higher than in other institutions. Without the collective subject, the school will cease to exist; individuals cannot simply participate as individuals.

But the collective subject has characteristics beyond its mere "groupiness." It is also characterized by mutual trust and care for one another. Each member of the group belongs, and each member expects every other member to care about their well-being at least more so than one would expect of a random person on the street or of a person who simply existed in shared social space.

The collective is also characterized by self-efficacy. If there is a problem at the school, the collective *we* must decide how to solve it. And we expect that we can solve it. We expect that as a group we have the power to figure things out and to solve any problems that arise, and even if the collective is somewhat less than confident, regardless there are no outside or other authorities to whom we can yield responsibility. During a winter assembly, a participant complained that several glass panels were missing on the wall of the enclosed porch on which the first year students were having classes. The first year activist who raised the concern did so in a manner which suggested that she was

pointing out the problem so that “those in charge” could fix it. Another activist at the assembly followed up the concern, however, by asking if anyone knew anyone who might know how to fix such a problem. A few students said yes. This question was followed up by another question about whether anyone else knew where to buy the glass. Quickly a plan was hatched to repair the glass amongst ourselves, by asking other activists or family members to do the work.

Relatedly, the collective is a dignified space. By working together to solve our own problems, we build dignity for ourselves and each other. Unemployed workers' movements in general were founded in part as a campaign for dignity. The term "unemployed worker" itself was a way for Argentina's poorest people to combat the individualistic notion that those unable to find work in a collapsing neoliberal model were simply too lazy to try. Instead, the *piqueteros* made dignity a central claim of their movements and defiantly redefined themselves as workers, locating the failure in the neoliberal regime rather than in themselves (Svampa and Pereyra 2003).

The collective, as a group of everyone involved at the school is potentially accessible to anyone. I want to be clear here, by stating that it is *potentially* accessible to anyone; not everyone is part of the collective, because not everyone wants to be part of it as such. Not everyone, for example, speaks up during assemblies and not everyone feels capable or motivated to solve school-wide problems. Those who do not speak or step up, however, do so largely out of their own decision not to take on the responsibility of full membership in the collective. In other words, while I had conversations with various

teachers and students who did not feel like they themselves were the leaders of the school, i.e., those responsible for making decisions and those responsible for solving problems. I can honestly say that none of these people felt like they were excluded from that role. Rather they were reluctant to step into it. Part of this is a normal part of the transition from individuals to a collective; not everyone transitioned in one moment, and some participants took longer than others to understand or desire membership in the collective.

This leads to a final characteristic of the collective, which is that its existence is a critique of neoliberal status quo. The collective is different, inherently, than the norms which guard the neoliberal world. The outside norms overlap with the characteristics of the individuals as they arrive at the school; there is extreme hierarchy and inequality, mistrust, disparate goals and individual achievement projects, and competition on all sides. Given this, it is no surprise that part of the process of becoming part of the collective was the ability to see the collective as such, and to understand one's own potential membership in it. Participants needed to learn to see themselves as capable dignified individuals, for example, in order to begin seeing school problems as *our* problems to solve.

Making visible collective values also makes visible neoliberal values. Take for example criticism of others. Each time an activist blamed their problems on someone else, or simply called out another person as having done something wrong, the message of the group was to ask the original speaker why they didn't help out, rather than throw

around blame. This kind of reaction not only implements a different value system, but also makes visible the taken for granted idea of “personal responsibility” in the outside world.

I want to be careful though, to differentiate this collective from the kind of flat organizational self-identification that we think of when we think of uncharitable ideas of cults. What I do not want to describe is a process in which each individual is absorbed into a pre-existing set of ideas or norms which they must adopt in order to be part of the group. Rather this collective is characterized by flexibility and the ways that it is constructed by and as part of its membership. In other words, the construction of the collective is a dynamic process in which both the group and the individual change as people become part of it.

Mazzeo and Stratta (2007) write that the power at work in utopian spaces is “the process through which the places of life (of work, of study, of recreation, etc.) of the subaltern classes are transmuted into constituent cells of a social and alternative power that permits them to win positions and modify the disposition of power and the relations of force, and, this is clear, to advance in the consolidation of a contra-hegemonic field” (p. 11). They continue, arguing that “the populist subject is not a fact of reality; on the contrary, it is a construction that reveals itself in a project” (p. 13). This vision of power foregrounds once again that subjectivity, and particularly collective subjectivity, is a process, not a finished result. I now turn to analyzing the key elements in the (re)production of this collective subject.

ELEMENTS PRODUCING THE COLLECTIVE

I argue that there are four elements that work in concert to produce and reproduce the collective from the aggregation of individuals who enter the doors of the people's high school. These elements are: 1) consensus-based decision-making; 2) non-hierarchical structure; 3) the *mística*; and 4) everyday collective effervescence. I use the word "elements" because like the wind, earth, fire, and water they are themselves in constant motion and (re)production. Furthermore, their relationship to the production of the collective subject is not linear, but rather messy and circular. Nonetheless, I believe that we can learn much about what makes a collective work well when it's working well by looking at these four key elements.

These elements are mutually reinforcing, but each is associated with a distinct set of practices and plays a different role in the production of the collective subject. None on its own, is sufficient, but, I argue, each is necessary. Below, I outline how this claim distinguishes my findings at the people's high school from previous research on utopian social movements which has tended to emphasize one or two of these elements and assumed that the other aspects of the collective subject followed necessarily.

Together these four practices create the collective described above. I characterize the first two, consensus-based decision-making and non-hierarchical structure, as formal or structural elements, while the latter two, the *mística* and everyday collective effervescence, are affective. This distinction has its roots partially in the existing

literature on social movements and utopianism. Replicating the subject/object epistemological divide, the social movements literature in the United States has tended to be divided into camps between sociologists interested in structures and replicable models and those interested in culture and meaning-making processes of movement participants (Goodwin and Jasper 2004). In my own fieldwork, I found aspects of both schools to be important. More importantly, I found that affect is also profoundly political.

CONSENSUS-BASED DECISION-MAKING

Maeckelbergh (2009) traces the relationship between participatory democracy and consensus-based decision-making in the United States and Europe in her examination of the alter-globalization movement. She argues that consensus in the New Left became conflated with a “conflict-free society” whereas after an incubation period of 30 or so years in use in much smaller spaces, consensus as used in the alter-globalization movement is often practiced in tandem with an ideal of “conflictive spaces.” According to her ethnographic account, “Insistence on conflict was an attempt to create a consensus process that allowed for diversity, a consensus that did not insist on unanimity” (p. 100).

My understanding of consensus is similar to Maeckelbergh’s description of 21st century consensus-based decision-making. Consensus-based decision-making means that any and all decisions made in and for the group must be agreed to by all members of the group. If even one person disagrees, a decision cannot be made. It is similar to, but not synonymous with, unanimous decision making. While all decisions must be approved by

everyone, it differs from unanimity in its spirit and practice. While a unanimous decision is the product of voting, consensus is the product of conversation. Unlike in a voting process, consensus assumes that any proposals or ideas brought to the meeting will be substantially changed and hopefully improved by disagreement. Consensus, then, is not the process of convincing everyone to think the same thing, but instead the art of consensus is collective problem solving. Potential ideas or proposals must meet a high bar of unanimous approval, but similarly anyone who wants a say in the decision must contribute to the decision-making process itself. Each person holds veto power, but veto cannot be exercised without the burden of solving the problem at hand.

Roots of Consensus

Consensus is a term for a group of decision-making practices that have been used in many times and places throughout history. In the North America and European traditions, its use in the twenty-first century is often traced back through feminist activism, to sectors of the civil rights movements, and finally back to the Quakers (Polletta 2002; Maeckelbergh 2009). An important part of its resuscitation on the left was the Zapatista uprising in 1994 (Graeber 2009). Other social scientists have outlined this history in order to think about both the intellectual and political trajectory of the practice, as well as to account for the success and failure of it as a tool in different movements and contexts. While consensus is not a unique or novel idea, it is also, as many have

emphasized, a practice that involves some skill and experience (perhaps *formación*) to succeed.

The trajectory in the English language literature is based on the New Left with some linkages back to the Quakers (Polletta 2002; Maeckelbergh 2009; Graeber 2009; Sitrin 2012). But clearly Argentine activists didn't learn these practices from reading a few books on the Civil Rights Movement and it is extremely unlikely that assemblies functioned or took off without people in them who had some practice in the techniques of managing such discussions, or experience with it as a powerful mode of interaction.

In the case of the 2001 movements in Argentina, relatively little has been written about from where exactly people learned to do consensus, but it's nearly certain that the intellectual trajectory has been somewhat distinct. The Zapatistas, however, have had a profound impact on the Left in the Latin America as well as in North America and Europe. Less known in the U.S. tradition (at least until recently) is the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra* or MST), which organizes itself in a similar form of modified horizontality and consensus as the Zapatistas. Both of these movements have been taken as inspiration by activists on the Argentine left (the two things I have seen on the wall of almost every movement space in Buenos Aires are a portrait of Che Guevara and Zapatista art), and especially in the case of the "nearby" MST, there has been a significant amount of exchange and communication. Activists at the National Assembly have written about the "grassroots

assemblies” of the MST, and use it as a blueprint for their own consensus practices. MST speakers are also often invited as speakers at movement plenaries or conferences.

Another strong influence seems to have been the World Social Forums (Giarracca 2001). Many activists from Buenos Aires were involved in the 2001 Forum in Porto Alegre, and in fact activists worldwide were learning about the Zapatistas, the MST, and consensus through similar and overlapping transnational networks. The alter-globalization movement was worldwide (not merely located in Europe and the United States) and this facilitated communication and interaction between a lot of movements (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Young Argentine activists like Ezequiel Adamovsky participated in global mobilizations inside and outside of Latin America (Barrientos and Isaía 2011). Furthermore, these transnational protests/forums created spaces where assemblies and consensus were practiced; in my own case, these large gatherings were a major part of how I learned how consensus operates.

The Zapatistas trace their use of consensus back to pre-Columbian, indigenous forms of village decision-making. Similarly, Zibeichi’s book *Dispersing Power* (2010) describes in detail how consensus forms an integral part of the indigenous uprising and social movements in Bolivia. Thus there is an important distinction in the intellectual trajectories of the tactic. Whereas activists in the Global North trace their roots back to deeply European traditions, those in Argentina and throughout Latin America use consensus as a way trace some connection to their pre-colonial past. This has perhaps had

a concrete impact on activist practice and the taken for granted understandings that are held about very similar political ideas.

Sitrin's second book (2012), for example, explains consensus as one part of horizontalism, and uses the same antecedents—US-based movements—to explain the philosophy and various uses. She does this as an explanation for the reader of what it is, but does not ask how Argentines learned it or came to adopt it. She focuses instead on why they practice it and how it works, and on its powerful political effects. It is noteworthy however that she does not really discuss “consensus” as such but rather engages “horizontal forms of decision-making.” This may be in order to capture a wider variety of practices and flexibility around the specific rules and structures used in assemblies. She does talk about how different groups use more or less structure, engaging a little bit with the questions of whether consensus is oppressive by looking at how people strive for more participation and the forms of leadership taken.

Svampa and Pereyra (2003) do not seem to engage the particularity of consensus to the assemblies practiced by the *piquetero* movements at all but they do trace the antecedents of the roadblocks not just to the puebladas (e.g., Auyero 2003) (which they say have a separate history) but to the land occupations that occurred in the 1980s in Argentina. The needs of these new neighborhoods, and especially the ways they were affected by the privatization of utilities, was a huge factor in the formation of specifically neighborhood-based movements like the MTDs, whereas the larger town-wide uprisings were not as spatially specific. One possibility is that the assembly is a technique more

practiced and more common when spaces are taken over, like the blockades, because of the way that consensus maximizes participation.

It is certainly crucial to understand the people's high school within the context of the sea change in the political and social movement landscape that took place in Argentina at the end of the twentieth century. As one small part of a transnational activist network, certainly the school and the MTD are part of a shared history of consensus-based decision-making with the resurgence of such practices in the alter-globalization movement worldwide. Furthermore, these movements were all mutually-inspired by the Zapatista uprising in 1994 and its reverberations. On the other hand, more locally the people's high school is only the next step in a series of movement-development that began most immediately with the *piquetero* movements in 1996. The school is thus both part of a transnational turn toward utopian politics and based on far more local and concrete developments in civil society. Ideas and practices of how to organize and make decisions weren't imported from abroad but were instead developed in a trial and error format over the preceding decade in roadblocks, neighborhood assemblies, recovered factories, and other unemployed workers' movements.

One of the clearest accounts of the development of these modes of organizing comes from research on the neighborhood assemblies that covered Buenos Aires in 2001-04. Di Marco et al. (2003) show how consensus and deliberative politics are thought to reconfigure the social and political landscape. As a major part of the explosion of new movements attempting to generate new politics and new forms of social relationships,

experiences in neighborhood assemblies form a backdrop of activist practical knowledge in which the people's high school was formed. Based on their multi level study of the neighborhood assemblies, Di Marco et al. discuss how many assemblies moved gradually from voting to consensus, as part of their search to "preserve horizontalism in participation and decision-making"⁴⁹ (p. 80). One woman quoted in the book, Susana, says

"In the beginning we voted on everything. Everything, up to the most insignificant thing, was voted on. Everything. ... There was a majority and a minority. The minority, with the vote, was excluded. Finally, after a lot of sessions reflecting and seeing what it was that we wanted from our assembly and I don't know what else, we realized that we preferred consensus. Or in other words we preferred that we all be integrated, beyond whether or not we were all 100% in agreement with whatever was happening. Here there is something clear: we are all absolutely different, we come from different places and with different training, but here we have to be clear that we have to be all together in whatever action we take. So, we try to lay our differences to the side and consense on what relates to the action, which is the most important thing"⁵⁰(P. 81).

This quote gives a good overview of the use and importance of consensus, and in particular how it allows for difference and what Maeckelbergh refers to as "conflictive spaces." The spirit is echoed repeatedly in interviews in *Horizontalism* (Sitrin 2006) as well.

⁴⁹ Translation mine.

⁵⁰ Translation mine.

Consensus at the People's High School

Consensus happens formally in an assembly, but it also permeates every space of the movement. The previous chapter described, for example, how the school's teachers decided on a system for mid-year evaluations. Graeber (2009) highlights the way that activists often change their minds midstream, compelled by the reasonable arguments made by other, an experience echoed in my conversations and interviews. In this way, the group's thinking evolves collectively toward a better decision. At the people's high school, as in many other consensus-based organizations, the formal arena for such decisions is an assembly.

On the form versus content of the assembly, Dri (2007) states "the assembly is not 'assembly-ism,' just as utopia is not utopianism. As utopia requires an actual project, the assembly requires organization. If the assembly is not organized, it is dispersed into the atoms that compose it, or better yet, its components are transformed into atoms that won't long delay in coming apart like the loose beads in a rosary" (p. 83).

Although consensus, then, is formally a method of decision-making, it is also more than that. Oftentimes the consensus process, like the one with Mario and the teachers I described in Chapter 6, can better be described as a method of problem-solving or even just a daily method of idea building. The process itself is fluid and almost constant, and it can therefore be hard to pinpoint where and when the decision actually occurred. Formally, as a decision, the plan for mid-term evaluation needed to be discussed and consensed upon at the school's assembly. However, the development of a

proposal for evaluation was a task that was clearly going to take more than 20 minutes at an assembly, and furthermore needed more input and communication with teachers. The reality was that the discussion began at a teacher's meeting in April in an effort to develop proposals and ideas as well as clearly relay the previous years' experience to build on it rather than reinvent the wheel from scratch.

This is a good illustration of the open, fluid, and dynamic nature of the healthiest consensus processes. Consensus is not something that happens at the final moment of decision-making, but is about idea development as a process that is open to input from everyone.

NON-HIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

The second formal element is a non-hierarchical organizational structure. This is also known as horizontal or flat, and means that there are no leaders or leadership positions. Not only does the people's high school not have a director, but neither is there a board of directors or other group charged with responsibility. The idea is that everyone has equal access to responsibility, and no one can speak on behalf of anyone else. Non-hierarchical structure is closely intertwined with the practice of consensus, since one cannot have meaningful consensus if some people have more decision-making authority or power than others.

The Role of the Referente

It seems that “non-hierarchical structure” while fairly descriptive, actually means different things to different people. To some people, it means absolutely no leadership roles, everyone must be involved in everything, and there must be full rotation of roles (Freeman 1972). This is a minority of groups and activists however, in the US context as well as in Argentina, among those who adhere to non-hierarchical principles. More commonly it means maintaining constant vigilance on the power dynamics within a group, and a set of structures or practices that are meant to impede the ability of any one person or group to have undue influence over the group. This often means a certain amount of decentralization, which is a part of the National Assembly’s structure as well as the people’s high school. For many activists, non-hierarchical structure is less about a particular structural form, and more about building an organization that is open to leadership and initiatives by whoever wants to do it.

Here, as with the other elements, I do not wish to argue that the people’s high school is always successful in meeting its goal, or that these elements characterize the space at all times and in all situations. As activists in *Horizontalism* (2006) emphasize repeatedly, this kind of revolution is constant, and the work is never done. Furthermore, at the MTD Barracas and the people’s high school, *strict* horizontal structure and non-hierarchy was not the goal. In response to both reflection on practice as well as a wider debate among movements about the meaning and use of horizontalism, the National Assembly developed an idea they call “democracy from below” which relies on the idea

of “*referentes no dirigentes*” (examples not leaders). This is in contrast to positions taken by other groups on the “independent left” which maintained stricter rotation of roles and horizontality.

Referentes were visible and played certain roles at the people’s high school. The clearest of these was their participation in the *mesas* that were used as spaces of organization and coordination between different parts of the movements. The term *referente* was often, but not always, interchangeable with the term *militante*, usually used as a way to demarcate activists who had been at the high school longer and participated in multiple spaces of the movement. In other words, the non-hierarchical structure of the people’s high school and the MTD Barracas was a complex and in many ways imperfect one.

For the *militantes*, the *referentes* were veteran activists who had been around a long time on the left. When Laura explained about *referentes* and *dirigentes*, she used Erika as an example, saying “that chick is a Peronist from way back! She was a Montonero, and she has not one but two daughters named Eva!”⁵¹ Of course she is a valuable source of knowledge.” Laura is in her late 20s and began her involvement in the National Assembly in 2009. She is one of the most active people at the people’s high school, and a large percentage of her life is organized around National Assembly or MTD events, meetings, and trainings. For younger *militantes* like Laura, *referentes* are people who may have been involved in the Montoneros in the 1970s or people who were at the

⁵¹ After Eva Perón.

Puente Pueyrredón in 2002 when Darío Santillán and Maxi Kosteki were killed by the police. *Referente* is not only an example or model; it has the connotation of a movement elder.

One of the methods many non-hierarchical organizations including the National Assembly use to achieve non-hierarchy is to avoid the idea that all projects or actions need to be approved by an assembly. At the people's high school, the *mesa* is used as a coordinating body between different spaces of the movement (recall Figure 1) but the important distinction here is that the *mesa* is used for coordination less than it is used as a mechanism to oversee or approve what is happening in various spaces. This structure represents a particular philosophy of decentralization and autonomism, where we coordinate to the minimum degree possible or desirable. In this way it's very similar to the idea of agreeing on the minimum thing we need to agree on in an assembly, the way Susana described above (Di Marco et al. 2003).

Of course the distinction between oversight and coordination is often blurry and sometimes the mesa *could* become an instrument of control over other spaces. As a place where the most trusted and involved members of the movement congregate to make plans and reflect, it has the distinct possibilities of being a concentration of power. Furthermore, how often it meets, where, and how one becomes involved was not known by every member of the movement. It is hard to tell if this is because the *mesa* has an interest in secrecy, or simply because every activist doesn't necessarily care what is happening at the *mesa* or in spaces outside of their immediate involvement in the school.

As it was, new teachers and students at the people's high school were often overwhelmed by the amount of information about the organization they were learning at first and found it difficult to absorb all of it.

One possible interpretation is the fact that the mesa's movements and discussions were not widely known, its shadowy presence at the people's high school, demonstrates how little control the mesa actually had over what was happening at the school. It never made its presence known as an instrument of control. At no point was anyone told during the year that I participated that we would need to wait to act on an idea for approval of the *mesa*. The only time, in fact, it was mentioned as place for approval was regarding my participation as a researcher, and even that never actually happened. Thus not only did the mesa not have any control over the day to day operations of the school, but even in terms of big decisions like retooling the curriculum or distributing teachers' salaries,⁵² the decision was made at the school, not at the level of the mesa, and the mesa was merely kept informed of what was happening. This is how the *mesa* functioned more as a coordinating body than a governing one.

It's also important to note that while this structure might have been liable to corruption or manipulation, it's difficult to imagine why a person would become involved in the people's high school or the larger MTD in order to 'gain power.' I cannot say it is

⁵² In 2012, after much protest and struggle with the city government alongside a coalition of other people's high schools, teachers at the MTD Barracas People's High School began receiving small salaries. The salaries were not per person, but rather per class, and thus resulted in being very small per teacher. The decision about how to manage the salaries was made collectively and a large percentage of the money was returned to the general fund of the school, while another portion was to be used for travel to and from the school. The decision process was begun in teachers' meetings during 2011, but was not closed until after the period of my fieldwork.

impossible, but I can say that activists either chose to get more involved or to stay around based on their belief in the utopian ideals of the movement. This is fundamental to the idea of utopia; people come to live out and construct their dreams. There are obstacles to this, and it is constant work, and any utopian project in the midst of neoliberalism will be vulnerable to ‘corruption.’ In fact, this kind of ultimate corruption or end could be almost inevitable (though I don’t necessarily think so), but for utopian activists that does not diminish the value of doing the project and building in its uncompromising utopian format. The value of participation in utopian social movements comes from each day of involvement rather than the accomplishment of long term goals (though those exist as well).

Horizontalism also comes strongly in to play during assemblies. There, too, no one in particular is in charge. Generally, a call is made for someone to stand by the chalkboard and facilitate the meeting by taking down an agenda and encouraging the group to get through it. This person then asks the group for agenda items and writes them all down. In contrast to many other organizations (at least in the U.S.), the facilitator at the people's high school rarely did much more than this. Occasionally this person called on speakers or reminded everyone to remain calm, but the process was very relaxed.

A key role in making these assemblies work are the *militantes*. *Militante* is a term used to refer to more experienced and more committed or involved activists. Its relationship with hierarchy is complicated, because it unquestionably differentiates the participation of some activists from others. During my fieldwork, an assembly never

began, for example, without the presence of at least one *militante*. Sometimes we even waited around, feeling like we lacked the authority to convene an assembly. This is clearly an imperfect situation, but it was also a situation in flux. In part, this was because *militantes* were defined by their involvement in multiple spaces of the movement and were therefore the only ones who could communicate what was happening in other parts of the movement generally to us and vice versa. Furthermore, a few *militantes* were charged with the task of making sure regular assemblies were actually occurring. In this sense, then, *militantes* were the ones with the authority to convene an assembly. And it was almost always a *militante* spurring the call for a facilitator and an agenda.

The National Assembly's political philosophy, however, argues that these *militante* roles are the innovation of a particular variety of horizontalism they practice: "democracy from below." The relevant part of the political theory argues that in the National Assembly there is a role for *referentes* (role models) but not *dirigentes* (leaders). In other words, it makes sense to allow those with more experience a role to share that organizational memory and expertise. The idea, however, is that these folks are a source of knowledge and serve as reference points, not as leaders with tangible authority. Activists may defer to *referentes*, or even to *militantes*, because they trust them. They often, for example, have moral authority that others respect. But if an activist disagrees, the *militante* doesn't have any power to ignore or overrule the objection. In other words, while some activists play a stronger role in shaping discussions than others, everyone has

equal veto power. The point isn't that *militantes* have no power, but instead the idea is to keep this soft power in play, under scrutiny, and in question.

Non-hierarchical structure means that *militantes* are constantly encouraging others to step forward. While *militantes* were the ones pushing for volunteers to facilitate assemblies, for example, they never did it themselves. Instead, they always encouraged those with less experience and confidence to step forward. Of the dozen assemblies I attended at the people's high school, teacher-activists only facilitated three. Nor did student *militantes* facilitate. Instead, newcomers and especially student-activists were consistently encouraged to step up to the chalkboard upon promises that everyone would help them keep track of what was said and where we were on the agenda. During individual evaluations, student-activists were encouraged to speak up more often during assemblies and take more active roles. Some *militantes* like Mari would even skip an assembly when they felt that the group had become too reliant on them to push us along, or show up late and ask why we hadn't already started without them.

Most importantly, though, becoming a *militante* was accessible to everyone. Differences were determined solely by enthusiasm and dedication. The best example of this was probably my own experience. Having entered the movement on shaky and problematic grounds (as a middle-class, U.S.-born researcher), through sheer willpower and consistently being present I was able to eventually become a trusted *compañera*. But this happened in other cases as well. Matías was a teacher-activist who joined late in the school year (in August, after the mid-year evaluations) to co-teach the first year natural

sciences class. A student at the University of Buenos Aires from a working class background, Matías had participated in other social movements but didn't know anyone at the MTD Barracas before he began teaching. Within about two months of his arrival, Matías was on his way to being considered a *militante*. He was enthusiastic about the people's high school as well as the National Assembly and the broader utopian political project, and it was impossible not to notice the way that he took on the commitment as an activist almost immediately. Taking on commitment, in this environment, did not mean accepting more tasks or work than anyone else. Instead, it meant simply coming to every event possible. For students and teachers alike this meant showing up to marches, assemblies, or parties that were held outside of class. Once Matías showed this interest in the movement, showing up on evenings when assemblies were held, or to a party held with other National Assembly schools in the area, he was invited to more and more events, meeting, and protests. Thus Matías became a *militante* simply by expressing interest and excitement in the movement. This is the essence of maintaining non-hierarchy at the people's high school. It wasn't about insisting that everyone be present for everything, but it was about making sure that everyone who wanted to have a role could, and keeping constant watch to make sure that circle was widening rather than shrinking.

AFFECTIVE ELEMENTS

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim gives one of the most

powerful and enduring descriptions of the power of the social, used as the epigraph to this chapter. This passage encapsulates the collective subject and it describes Durkheim's fundamental insight and contribution to sociology: the social is something more than simply an aggregate of individuals, it is "outside of and superior to the individual." Elsewhere in the book, Durkheim conceptualizes of this sensation as a periodic awareness of a collective subject of which individuals in society are a part. This periodic awareness is brought forth by community events that create and re-create intense bonds and relationships between community members. The "exaltation" experienced by participants is known as collective effervescence. The exaltation is produced by the joy of being part of a collective subject, and its production is itself part of a cyclical re-production of society itself, for without these bonds we are not part of a single entity bigger than ourselves but rather more like an aggregate of individuals.

At the people's high school, this feeling of joy in the collective subject is a daily occurrence which is consciously produced and maintained by both small daily practices as well as periodic special acts. Based on my fieldwork, I argue that these two classes of feelings—those based on daily practices of solidarity and warmth as well as those based on periodic rituals—constitute two crucial elements in the (re)production of the collective subject. In doing so, I depart from previous work on utopian social movements.

MÍSTICA

At the people's high school, I argue that there are two distinct affective elements

related to collective effervescence. The first is what participants themselves call the *mística*. In general Argentine Spanish, *mística* is a synonym for mystique. While activists at the people's high school are not the only ones to imbue this generic term with a more specific meaning referring to the solidarity and social bonds between people engaged in political or movement activity together, participants at the people's high school were unique in their usage of the word to apply without intermediary to any activity that was designed to call forward this feeling of connection to others and to a larger whole.

Mística then, refers both to the feeling produced in a moment of connection as well as to the activities designed to elicit this connection. The application of the word is sometimes so broad that at one point another foreign activist explained it to me thus: "They mean an art activity. I don't know why they call it a *mística*."

Once, for example, at a planning meeting for the monthly teachers' meeting, one of my colleagues on the committee announced "we need a *mística*." Eventually we had an idea: we would write four sentences, and then cut up the individual words. Participants at the meeting would then be divided into four groups, and the words from one sentence would be taped to the backs of participants in each group. The aim was to be the first group to put together the original sentence. In this case, *mística* almost meant simply "ice breaker."

But what is really being referred to with the word is something almost identical to the moments Durkheim described. These art activities are used as a way to generate the feeling. Except perhaps for its particular intensity (the *mística* was not, of course, a time

to engage in sexual orgies, for example), the sense of the word is the same. The *mística* is a feeling that happens, as one interviewee told me, at the best assemblies, when we know we are all connected to each other and part of something bigger than ourselves individually.

While the *mística* might mean something as quotidian as an ice breaker, it was just as likely to mean something much more elaborate, emotional, and meaningful. At one citywide gathering of National Assembly high schools, for example, we spent the first hour or so at the party building a *mística* together. The *mística* had been planned by the party's hosts, *compañerxs* at another people's high school. After most guests had arrived but before dinner, we were asked to break into groups by school. We then brainstormed what the people's high school meant to each of us, and called them out as one teacher wrote these words on slips of paper. Each group taped their slips to the long handle of a handmade torch. The host group then led us in a movement song, as we stood together in our groups. At the beginning of the second song, we began slowly marching and dancing out to the bonfire outside of the building. We formed a circle around the bonfire, which we lit with the torches of each of our schools. We continued to march and dance around the bonfire, singing, for a few more songs, until we eventually ended our singing with a few loud chants. The party began in earnest only after we had symbolically cemented our commitment to the ideals of the people's high schools and melded our separate groups together with the flames of struggle.

The moments when affective elements were most present were often recognized by activists with some self-consciousness, exemplified by the often-heard refrain “we are such hippies.” At another, smaller gathering, around 30 of us ended a meeting with a *mística*. We were standing in a circle inside a meeting room of the school, when one or two *militantes* handed out candles. We lit the candles, and another activist turned out the lights in the room. Song sheets were handed out, with the words to several political songs used by the movement, including some that had been specifically written for the National Assembly. We started walking around in a circle, singing the protest songs and holding our candles. Eventually, we were prompted to tip our candles in to the center of the circle, mixing the wax from each candle together.

The atmosphere was both solemn and slightly giddy. Openly emotional activities such as these are uncommon in neoliberal life, and they tend as a result to make us uncomfortable. One person even cried “Look at us! We are such hippies!” At the school, experiencing this discomfort and open displays of emotion and pride in the organization together brought us closer.

But the *mística* was not always ridiculous, and it didn’t always need to be this elaborate or showy although it was always self-conscious. In fact, one of the things that impressed me as I began my research into Argentine utopian social movements was the way that creativity, art, and love were seamlessly woven into the everyday life of movements. I was given a tour, for example, of the museum gallery on the upper floor of a recovered factory. I took pictures of humble buildings constructed by activists out of

recycled materials that included sections of brightly colored recycled glass. And I was asked at the end of a meeting to sing a few movement anthems in a mostly bare cement building with political poetry painted over the doors.

EVERYDAY COLLECTIVE EFFERVESCENCE

While the *mística* could be fairly quotidian, I distinguish it from another element which I here term “everyday collective effervescence.” The main distinction between the two is that while the *mística* was a self-conscious attempt to generate these feelings, everyday collective effervescence was a set of affective practices governing relationships and interactions at the people’s high school and in the larger movement. The norms in these spaces were markedly different from those in the outside, neoliberal world.

I want to take a moment to clarify how everyday collective effervescence is different from the more general idea of solidarity. Others have identified solidarity as either an instrument of building a social movement, or an outcome. What is different here is how I am looking at it as part of the process of something bigger—the production of the collective subject—, rather than either an ends or a means in and of itself.

Specifically, here I explore the daily practices that build and maintain this feeling.

Everyday collective effervescence refers to the feeling that, as I show, characterizes presence at the people’s high school on a daily basis. We could define this feeling as the expectation of certain kinds of relationships or social interactions in the everyday. It is the spirit in which we act and expect reciprocation when we are at the people’s high

school. Everyday collective effervescence reminds participants that our relationships with each other are qualitatively different than the relationships people have with each other in the outside, neoliberal world.

Some of these practices were self-conscious, but none of them was as self-conscious or as contrived as the *mística*. What I want to signal with the term though, is a set of practices and the feelings they engendered that constituted part of the everyday experience of being in the physical and social space of the people's high school (as described in Chapter 3). Everyday collective effervescence describes a set of practices that made up the basic expectations and norms of the movement. These practices, as I'll detail below, were often based on common practices in outside society but were done slightly (or sometimes radically) differently inside of the people's high school. Two examples of common affective/social practices come to mind, both of which draw heavily on cultural repertoires specifically available in Argentina.

One example of a practice within the realm of everyday collective effervescence is how people are greeted during arrival and exit from meetings. In most parts of Argentine society, people kiss each other on the cheek and perhaps hug when they say hello. This practice extends into one's immediate social circle, but would not usually extend to an entire classroom or large meeting. For example at parties people often only kissed those they were closest to. By contrast, at the people's high school, people arriving at a meeting would often conscientiously travel around an entire circle kissing and greeting each person individually rather than just the individuals they knew best, as I

described in Chapter 6. More than once I observed this behavior in a circle of more than 50 people, where simply saying hello took someone 20 or more minutes.

The second example is the circulation of *yerba mate* within the people's high school, which followed similar patterns. Whereas at other gatherings people would circulate the *mate* among those they were directly attending an event with, at the people's high school – and especially at assemblies and other meetings – the *mate* was circulated around the group as a whole.

I argue that these are not casual behaviors but intentional practices of strengthening social ties between activists. Further, this behavior can be distinguished from extending one's friend group, since it coexisted particular personal relationships and cliques. In other words, Polletta (2002) describes, for example, the complicated balance of friendship and comradeship in direct democracy. Historically many movements that have tried to build stronger affective ties have struggled with insider and outsider or clique problems that are created by the existence of friend groups within larger movement groups. While these friendships have been the basis for solidarity among activists, Polletta argues that they are also a limiting factor as not everyone is actually friends within the movement. In the process of trying to build solidarity, or what Argentine activists call *compañerismo*, however, friendship norms are the ones that are often used. By contrast, at the people's high school and in its larger associated movement, there was a clear distinction between the fact that we were all *compañeros* although we did not all need to be friends. Extending certain practices of intimacy and

warmth beyond one's friend group did not necessarily mean extending one's friend group.

I described this subjective experience in Chapter 3 when I described Laura's enthusiastic and friendly entrance to the assembly. Had Laura come in tentatively and tried to assimilate her mood to the vibe of the room, her greetings would have been much more subdued and would have been received much less enthusiastically. Instead, she came in expecting the school to be a place of warmth and joy in fellowship, and by doing so, she reminded the rest of us that this was actually the case. In other words, Laura did not just activate latent warmth in the room, but she activated the everyday collective effervescence. She reminded us of the joy we took in being in each others' company simply by expressing that joy herself. The important thing is that the warmth was there to be "activated". In another space, Laura's actions might have made people grumpier, but because we expected to treat each other this way, her actions reminded us to change our attitudes and we responded positively.

The experience of the school as a place where one felt loved and cared for, where one felt part of a collective, was echoed in many conversations and interviews. In one interview, for example, I had a conversation with Juana about a teacher who had joined mid-year. The *compañera* student, a woman who I was close to and who trusted me as a committed teacher-activist, summarized her doubts about the new teacher by declaring "He doesn't even greet us when he comes in the room."⁵³

⁵³ In Argentine Spanish the verb "saludar" (to greet) is used to refer to the custom of kissing one cheek.

In interviews, when asked about how they felt at the school, student-activists repeatedly answered that the people's high school was a place where they felt cared for. As I explained in Chapter 2, they told me that the school was a place where if someone has a problem, other people help them solve it or even simply express empathy. The problem at hand could be something related to school work (one student who struggled particularly with math mentioned the supportiveness of other students), but it could also be a personal difficulty. Given the characteristics of the student population, personal problems were often very serious and the school was a significant source of community support of the type lacking in the *villa*.

PRODUCING THE COLLECTIVE

The point of calling these “elements,” then, is that they are all four important and crucial elements in the transition of atomized individuals to a cohesive collective. As I said above the collective is characterized by: mutual trust and care; mutual goals; self-efficacy; dignity; accessibility to potentially anyone; critique of the neoliberal status quo; and dynamism.

Everyday collective effervescence clearly solidifies and performs work in this transition because by strengthening our relationships to each other, we learn to see ourselves as a group. We also learn to see ourselves as an important part of that group. When one shows up and people act clearly as if they are happy to see them, one starts to feel as if they are an important and necessary part of that group. They consider

themselves as integral as anyone else, and think of their role as important. They recognize that they have something in common with these people, and feel as if they both want to and can build something with them. They see that we can do almost anything we want, and notice that if they had an idea that they wanted to implement others would listen to them, just as they would to anyone else. They also know that if they disagree with others, they have something to lose (this warmth and fellowship) if they do so disrespectfully or without good reason.

The *mística* shows each member how powerful the group is. It brings the feeling of belonging to a fever pitch, as Durkheim described, and each of us can see that this is a group that *is* cohesive and therefore can accomplish things—at least when we act together. This establishes that others can be trusted (because we can be openly emotional together) and that furthermore they are not my competition but rather my support system.

Non-hierarchical structures reinforce formally some of the feelings and understandings of the social space of the people's high school engendered by everyday collective effervescence. For one thing, the organization is formally open to my ideas and leadership on any given project or idea. In other words, these emotional or subjective kinds of warmth are not empty gestures or merely emotional but they are actually backed up by organizational structure.

This is what makes everyday collective effervescence different from how it may happen in other social spaces, like churches. While fellowship among parishioners is often a goal in a very similar spirit to the people's high school, it is not the case that the

organization is officially, clearly, and formally open to participants stepping up with a voice, opinion, and action on whatever matter they feel is important. The organizations may parallel each other in terms of welcoming participants with warmth, but only in the people's high school example is that welcome extended to matters of important decisions and leadership on projects or initiatives.

Consensus works in a parallel way to non-hierarchical structures. I may "block" things indiscriminately if I have no shared goals or trust with other activists (in fact, this was a problem faced by many nascent Occupy! groups in 2011). I may also be reluctant to offer my contribution to the conversation if a formal offer of consensus is not underpinned by the feeling that people are glad for my presence at the meeting. Similarly, without everyday collective effervescence, an organization may be formally open to my contribution, but without the practices that make me feel cared for, I will probably not feel as though my contribution will be heard even though I have the formal opportunity to offer it.

The point is that one of these elements without the other half falls flat. Neither the formal elements nor the affective elements are on their own sufficient to engender a collective. The argument I am advancing is that each of these elements is interdependent with the others. In particular, the presence of both formal and affective dimensions is critical to the generation of the kind of collective I am theorizing here. These elements are present in a range of other organizations but are rarely in combination with each other and this, I argue, is what makes a utopian social movement successful (this will be

expanded in the following chapter). What I call here “everyday collective effervescence” for example, is surely recognizable to many readers unfamiliar with utopian social movements but with experience in other community organizations. Similarly, non-hierarchical leadership structures, while less common, are not on their own successful as an avenue to social change because without the affective components enumerated here they do not lead to a collective subject.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ One example that comes to mind is my experience with a social movement in the Twin Cities. While this movement practiced a form of consensus accompanied by a non-hierarchical structure, activists’ steadfast avoidance of any practices aimed at strengthening the affective mechanisms undermined the transformative power of the movement. As an engaged participant, I saw that consensus simply did not work without everyday collective effervescence.

Conclusion: Political Education, Contentious Politics, and Utopian Social Change

This concluding chapter places the people's high school in context within its more macro-level political goals as a social change project. While the last chapter showed how the collective subject is (re)produced, this chapter explores the significance of the people's high school beyond the individual level. In this conclusion, I return in more detail to the National Assembly, how the people's high school is situated within it, and its stated political project. I describe some of the National Assembly's (and the school's) engagement with more traditional contentious politics. Building on data and analysis presented in previous chapters, I then explore the link between education, politics, and liberation, arguing that the National Assembly is a site where education is politicized and politics is intellectual. A central bridge between these two is Paolo Freire, who articulates how all of this is central to freedom. This chapter embraces and expands upon Freire's vision of liberation, calling it *dialogic freedom*. The last two sections of the chapter are devoted to a discussion of social change as such, and conclude the dissertation by summarizing how each aspect of the analysis fits together. This part of the chapter revisits the concept of utopian social movements, introduced in Chapters 1 and 2, laying out how *dialogic freedom*, struggles for material well-being, and the collective subject are related to each other and to the social change happening at the people's high school as a utopian social movement.

PIQUETE AT 9 DE JULIO

We met at the school around 5:30 pm, our normal class time, before heading out to the large protest we had decided to join in lieu of class today. It was late September and starting to warm up outside, and this was one of the last times we were in the old school building. I arrived to find Mari and three students sitting in the classroom chatting. There with Mari were Andrés and Elizabet from the first year class, and Martina from the second year class.

As I sit down and start to chat, the others tell me that Martina is the only student left from the second year. A group of other second year students showed up for class, but left when they discovered that we were holding class out at the encampment instead of in the school today. I'm shocked that students would so openly refuse involvement in the MTD's contentious politics—that is, more obvious politics like protests targeted at the state—after a year and a half of attendance at the school. Not everyone agrees with activism like this, but the school is so clearly entwined with “the movement” that after 18 months one would assume that students would have given up on attending if they continued to disagree.

We wait for a while longer, and, late as always, Juana scurries in, ready to head to the mobilization with us. Other *compas* are already at the *piquete*, having gone earlier in the day with other groups from the MTD to blockade the street. The protest is a huge mobilization, called by a coalition of which the National Assembly is a part along with other *piquetero* groups across the spectrum (including several groups who share few

political assumptions with the National Assembly⁵⁵). We are there to demand improvements to the most recent social welfare plan, Argentina Works, one aspect of which creates paid employment within movement-run cooperatives. Our demands include an expansion of the program to include slots for more workers, especially those outside of greater Buenos Aires, and an increase in pay for work in the program to the legal minimum wage.

When we got to downtown, people had obviously been camped out for a while already. It was an impressive sight. 9 de Julio is a branch of the Pan-American Highway, and is the widest avenue in the world. The blockade was several blocks long, and all 14 lanes of traffic were filled with *piqueteros*. It was late afternoon, still light out, and warmish when we arrived. The air is smoky and thick with the acrid smell of burning rubber from the stacks of burning tires used to create the blockade. This has been a common practice since the *piquetes* began in the 1990s out on the highways and serves to more effectively block traffic. I know from previous experience that once the sun goes down these tire fires will also be useful sources of heat for those who camp out overnight.

Andrés and I walked around, and he asked me to take a picture of him. “Meg! Will you take a picture of me with all the people in the background?” Andrés was smiling from ear to ear, but also looking a little embarrassed too.

⁵⁵ As I mentioned in Chapter 5, although *piquetero* groups have some basic things in common (organization around the tactic of a *piquete*, advocacy on behalf of the poor and unemployed), they disagree strongly on other things, for example maintaining autonomy from the state, affiliation with political parties, (non)hierarchical organization, and Peronism. These differences span both ideological divides as well as differing practices. I describe the National Assembly’s position in the following section of this chapter.

I snap Andrés' picture, and I try to catch the panorama of protestors behind him. He is standing near a large Argentine flag, one of many that are waving all over the place in the scene. On both sides of the avenue I see banners for other groups, especially a few other major *piquetero* groups, with large clusters of people around each banner.

As far as the eye can see, people are sitting in circles large and small sharing *mate* and chatting. Some people have put up tents, while others are sitting on makeshift seats on curbs and other parts of the urban landscape. I am terrible at estimating crowd size, but this looks like thousands of people.

We see a group of women all wearing matching yellow t-shirts sitting together and joking. Many of them have backpacks on and a few have children with them. I recognize Flor and one or two other women; they are from another project of the MTD Barracas, one that a few of the students work with. Andrés goes up to them and starts chatting, and Flor introduces me to a few of the women.

After a few moments chatting, we move on. We are ostensibly looking for the rest of our group from the school, but Andrés and I are both interested to kind of walk through the crowd and see what it looks like. We see another group spray painting a large stencil on the street that says "The Minimum Wage Is a Right - National Assembly" in hot pink. It's about 5' x 2' and includes a raised fist holding a shovel.

Along the way we run into Romina and shortly after that we find the group from the school starting to form a large circle. Laura is spreading out the supplies for our activity and there is a substantial group from the San Telmo school. The San Telmo

group is much larger partly because we are much closer to their school building. On top of that, their classes start later, so this group walked over together once everyone got there for class. Beyond that, though, the San Telmo group always shows up in larger numbers than the Barracas group. Students at that location have more affinity for these explicitly political events than their Barracas counterparts. The San Telmo school has been running a few years longer, which means it has a more clearly defined culture and students are socialized into the political project more quickly and clearly. When it comes to this kind of political activity, we struggle in Barracas to relate the politics to the school. Students complain that they aren't that interested and they seem to fail to see how it is part of the same project. This has something to do with the lack of a critical mass of interest. But even beyond that, there's a sort of bad vibe about "politics" in Barracas which doesn't seem to exist in the same way in San Telmo.

Among the teacher activists, for example, there is little debate about the importance or relevance of doing a "public class" today at the blockade although there are also teachers who lack interest. Teresa didn't bother to come at all even though Wednesday is also her night to teach. Instead, she interpreted class as canceled and just didn't bother to show up because she felt like there was no relevance to her class with this protest. In general, Teresa doesn't feel like part of the movement, often referring to *militantes* at the school and movement-wide events as "them."

Once most everyone has arrived, we form a large circle of *compañerxs* from both schools in one corner of the *piquete*, on a grassy spot of parkway between the avenue and

the side street. Laura and Verónica are doing most of the facilitation for the activity. Our plan was to hold a “public class,” effectively inviting everyone at the protest to join our regular Wednesday night classes. (In practice, almost no one but existing *compañerxs* of the school participate, but there is still nice synergy between our popular education project and the protest.) After some hasty planning over email, the lesson plan we have chosen is to construct a timeline of recent Argentine history with a particular emphasis on the history of Argentina Works and how we arrived at a *piquete* in front of the Ministry of Social Development. The activity is a “classic” one for the people’s high school, although we’re often more interested in leading up to the founding of the National Assembly. In fact, the materials for this activity came from a similar one done just beforehand at the teachers’ meeting.

We begin by drawing the timeline on a large sheet of paper and then the facilitators start asking for participants to call out things that happened in the late 1990s. After we have a few orienting events written onto the timeline, Verónica begins introducing the pre-printed squares of paper with important events and dates. She and Laura alternate between reading the papers out loud and asking where to paste them on the sheet, and asking for people to call out major events they can remember as we move forward on the timeline. *Compas* volunteering additions are asked to paste the sheets onto the timeline as we go along. The point of the lesson, as Laura writes in her email proposal to the small planning group, is

to revisit the questions related to the struggle for work in recent years (maybe putting some things from the ‘90s, but

more centered in these last few years), explaining why, when, and in what context Argentina Works arose, what was the encampment in 2009 and why they camped out, etc. ... getting to the present to be able to contextualize and understand why we are taking this measure.

It's a bit hard to hear with all the noise from everyone around us, but the activity is more or less successful and at the end of it we have a round of applause for ourselves just like every assembly.

After our class was over, we applauded and then all got up to join the rest of the protest or go home. Andrés was very excited to go join the excitement in the middle of the road (our class had been held in a grassy/sidewalk area between the avenue and the access road to the east of it). He began waving the National Assembly flag around agitating for us to join the fun while I said goodbye to Elizabet, Juana, and Claudia and gave Elizabet the extra copies of the materials I had printed for the timeline lesson. Then I followed Andrés, Mari, and her daughter to the center of the road with Romina following me.

We joined a large group of other people from the National Assembly, identifiable by their flags and t-shirts. We were all in a circle dancing and singing protest songs, with a *murga* (a carnival-style marching band) off to the side playing for us. In the wider scene, throughout the blockade, there were numerous other circles dancing, having meetings, sharing *mate*, and so on. It seemed as if most of the different organizations participating were keeping to themselves with a sort of unofficial division of the street blockade.

We moved close to the center of the circle and started singing. I took out my recorder to record some of the singing (which Romina noticed and smiled about), and a sheet with the lyrics to the songs came from somewhere and Mari passed it to Andrés and eventually I got it. We sang iconic songs of the *piquetero* movement as a whole, popular at protests probably since even before 2001, along with other songs that were specifically written by activists in the National Assembly. Every once in a while, after a few songs, someone would yell a traditional call and response used to keep alive the memory of comrades fallen in the struggle:

Call: Darío Santillán?
Response: Present!
Call: Maxi Kosteki?⁵⁶
Response: Present!
Call: 30,000 disappeared *compañeros*?
Response: Present!
Call: When?
Response: Now and forever!
Call: Where will we see each other?
Response: In the struggle!

Then we began singing “*pi-que-teros ¡carajo! pi-que-teros ¡carajo!*” which means something like “*piqueteros* hell yeah!” (although it’s a little more profane than that).

We sang and danced, and people took turns running into the center of the circle and making a mosh pit during the choruses. Romina left fairly quickly, and Inés came up and chatted with me about scheduling her interview. As we stood and sang and danced, various people from the school and the MTD came up that we knew and the group filled up with *militantes*.

⁵⁶ Both activists killed on the Puente Pueyrredón in 2002.

As we sang and danced, night fell.

POLITICS OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

In Chapter 1, I described the relationship between the people's high school, the MTD Barracas, and the National Assembly. Figure 1 displayed this relationship in very broad terms, showing how the school is one project happening in the same neighborhood (and often the same building) of the same movement of unemployed workers, the MTD Barracas. As I described there and in Chapter 7, the school is completely part of the MTD but also functions fairly autonomously. The *mesa* of the MTD doesn't function as an authority that regulates what happens at the school. While MTD and local National Assembly events and projects are always announced at school assemblies (and in fact, the schedule is almost always changed to accommodate any conflicts), it is possible to be a *compañera* of the school and never involve yourself in any other MTD or National Assembly project. This is the case, for example, with the second year students who walked out of the school when they found out that our "class" was going to be part of the blockade.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ There is much more that can be said about this relationship between the MTD and the school. Although the school is literally part of "the movement" (referring to the MTD), oftentimes *compas* at the school referred to it as something external, up to and including stating that they don't really participate in the movement. On the other hand, the school is dependent on the MTD for much of its funding and resources. Finally there was some tension between the *piquetero*-identity of the MTD Barracas and the identity of the school, especially the *compañerx* teachers. I will explore this tension a bit more in the Conclusion, but much of what I know is speculative rather than strongly empirically-based.

The National Assembly is the pseudonym for a national network of movements in Argentina that was formed in 2004.⁵⁸ The National Assembly was founded as part of the larger evolution of the 2001 movements and *piquetes*. Between the first roadblocks in the late 1990s and the formation of the National Assembly, there was a long process of organization building, which still continues today. Most MTDs, as I showed in Chapter 5, evolved from a particular neighborhood based project. Perhaps the community first came together around a soup kitchen, or perhaps around a roadblock demanding government assistance for their lack of electricity. Once organized as MTDs, the movements came together and formed and re-formed in different coalitions and supra-organizations, coordinating their political positions. The main differences between MTDs had to do with their positions vis-à-vis the government. Over the years, debates have raged and alliances have shifted in terms of movements' willingness to compromise with government programs and older political parties. The National Assembly is on the more autonomist spectrum of the movements, cherishing its independence and maintaining distance from the Peronist parties, but it has also participated in state-sponsored programs and accepted subsidies.

The Assembly was founded at a meeting of several territorial groups throughout Argentina, including some groups which were already coalitions. Although the National Assembly has some similarities to a coalition, it is more cohesive than that. Participating movements share political analysis and objectives with the National Assembly to some

⁵⁸ This organization faced a dramatic change in early 2013, a little over one year after the end of my fieldwork, when it split in half. Here I describe the National Assembly as it was in 2011.

degree, putting out position papers and other statements analyzing the contemporary political situation in Argentina and agreeing upon certain principles for political action. Most importantly, modified horizontalism as I described in Chapter 7 (known as “democracy from below”) is a shared assumption of all groups involved.

As a “multi-sectoral movement” with student and intellectual sectors as well as employed and unemployed workers, the National Assembly is reflexive and articulate about its own political project. It is one part of an enormous, shifting terrain of movements in the post-2001 era in Argentina, and as such is rooted in the rejection of politics since the dictatorship, especially the neoliberalism of Menem’s administrations throughout the 1990s. Consequently the National Assembly is also rooted in the search for an alternative politics. This search is strongly based in practice, but not to the rejection of intellectual projects. The movement also, although multi-sectoral, sees its own roots in the neighborhoods in which its territorial work is based and protects workers’ hegemony in the movement identity.

Thus the movement searches for a path between and beyond traditional leftist political parties in Argentina. The political project assembles aspects of populism, Peronism, anarchism, socialism, and communism while strictly adhering to no single party line, instead favoring particular principles and actions. The National Assembly identifies as anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, feminist, and rooted in indigenous traditions of resistance to colonization. It identifies itself as part of the “independent left,” and explicitly seeks to avoid cooptation (particularly, in 2011, by Kirchnerism). Importantly,

the National Assembly sees this struggle for social change embedded in practice and collective reflection. The National Assembly draws on an eclectic mix of leftist theory, and the emphasis on grounding ideas in collective practice allows *compañerxs* from distinct political traditions to exist comfortably together in the movement.⁵⁹

Grounded in praxis, the National Assembly has produced a significant quantity of political theory analyzing both the Assembly's project as well as reflecting more broadly on the political situation in Argentina and Latin America. The majority of these have been published through the Assembly's own publishing collective, although each of these are attributed to individual authors and therefore do not represent any official movement perspective.⁶⁰

The most significant concept around which the Assembly's politics are based, and one that features heavily in the Assembly's workshops and *formación* groups, is *poder popular*. I will forego translating this term since, as should become obvious in the next paragraph, its definition requires a certain amount of development and the translation depends on this understanding.

In an introduction to a volume of essays on *poder popular*, the authors begin by distinguishing *poder popular* (popular or people power) from populism (*populismo*) itself. They begin by stating that they will refer to *poder popular* as socialism, but that it

⁵⁹ As I alluded to in Chapter 6, *compañeros* often joke with each other about who is more trotskyist and who is more anarchist. Both of the above exist in relative harmony with staunch Peronists like Erika, mentioned in Chapter 7, who has two daughters named after Eva Perón.

⁶⁰ I am in an awkward position here as an ethnographer; if I cite the works I am quoting and referencing below in full (as is only just), I would sacrifice whatever anonymity I have afforded my informants here. I have therefore redacted the names of the authors and works cited below.

is not socialism in any existing strict definition. They say they start “very far from all binary composition, typical of military frameworks and of the crudest part of the left. We are speaking of a dialectical contradiction, constitutive of the popular and of the subaltern condition: humanity dehumanized, insubordination subordinated, and definition undefined.”⁶¹ They distinguish *poder popular* from populism, which “conceives of the people as a pre-political subject and resorts to essentialism or merely discursive articulations. Populist political interventions seek to resolve substantive contradictions based on the strategic and long-term interests of the dominant classes.”⁶² *Poder popular*, then, is akin to socialism but always minding its dialectical nature and its essence as something *of* the popular classes, not merely *for* or *with* them.

In the Foucauldian tradition, the authors of the introduction along with most of the theorists in the volume of essay conceive of the subject as a process of creation. Thus this process is constant and ongoing; there is not so much of a real thing as a process of social relations. On the next page, the authors continue by highlighting the importance of seeing subjectivity in construction, stating that socialism “hopes for the radical restructure of social relations, for which direct popular participation is key. For socialism, ‘the people’ is the formula that articulates subaltern pluralities; ... the name of a self-constituted revolutionary subject in the class struggle.”⁶³

According to their description, populism and socialism:

⁶¹ Uncited per confidentiality of data; translation mine.

⁶² Uncited per confidentiality of data; translation mine.

⁶³ Uncited per confidentiality of data; translation mine.

are two antagonistic modes of registering demands. For example, populism is compatible with clientelism and paternalism, with a division of roles whose function is to avoid violent conflict between classes, a division between those who command and those who obey, between those who give and those who receive (for populism to share is to reproduce the social order). The socialism to which we aspire is incompatible with these practices, under whatever circumstance.⁶⁴

They continue that

a people's movement, if it aspires to a revolutionary and socialist condition, cannot classify the 'masses' by their level of consciousness. On the contrary, ... they should accept these dissimilar levels as an unavoidable point of departure and work in the pursuit of consolidation at the highest level of consciousness possible. It tries to politically impact the popular field, not to transcend it. A popular praxis should articulate the realism of conditions with the innovative audacity derived from an always excessive utopian spirit.⁶⁵

This is all to say that the socialism to which they (we) aspire must always start from below and base itself in the realities of the subaltern. *Poder popular* is a form of socialism that is clearly about both material conditions of class and subjectivity. In this way, the theory is nicely compatible with standpoint theory, for example, arguing that the subaltern position is the appropriate one from which to understand and therefore challenge power and hegemony. A "real" socialism, however, doesn't try to transcend this position, but rather remains there.

⁶⁴ Uncited per confidentiality of data; translation mine.

⁶⁵ Uncited per confidentiality of data; translation mine.

POLITICIZED EDUCATION AND INTELLECTUAL POLITICS

I argue here that a) the vision of politics is one that includes a significant portion of intellectual work, b) the practice of education in the movement is one that is Freirean and mimics political ideas, and finally c) the combination of these two things implies a particular vision and *practice* of social change consonant with that outlined by Freire in later work on freedom. Below, I continue by arguing that this vision of social change is one that is utopian, and one that is being accomplished in the school.

Intellectual Politics

It is not difficult to see the important role of education, learning, and knowledge production in producing the “self-constituted revolutionary subject.” The project of the National Assembly includes, finally, book publishing, theorizing, innumerable workshops, and of course schools. Intellectualism and education, then, are crucial to the political project of the National Assembly and its constituent MTDs.

Nor is the National Assembly alone in this. Several authors writing more generally on the twists, turns, and meaning of the new utopian social movements in Argentina (or even in Latin America more generally) have explored how the development of educational projects have seemed like a logical step for many movements at a certain point in their organizational trajectory (Pacheco 2012; Sitrin 2012; Zibechi 2010). These education projects include people’s high schools but also less institutionalized projects,

like workshops on particular topics that may be one meeting or ongoing, and other workshops that are more generally tied to *formación*.

Formación itself, in fact, is a good example of how the National Assembly and other utopian social movements see knowledge production and dissemination as an essential element of social change projects. Among the National Assembly and its sister movements *formación* is considered essential work for *militantes*. It's sometimes used in its verb form as an imperative. In other words, the duty of a good activist is to reflect on their practices and their relationship to a larger vision of social change, as well as to understand what the "greats" have said before you. A good friend and committed *militante* of the National Assembly admonished me once, for example, to take some time and educate myself in order to be a better *militante* for the National Assembly. She specifically suggested that I read Che Guevara's writings, along with a few other "classics." Central to this list, of course, is Marx, but the list goes well beyond him. *Formación* is thus considered the *duty* of a committed activist to the movement. *Formación* isn't a kind of individual edification, but instead helps us understand our place in history and the struggle, writ large. As *militantes*, we have a duty to understand as much as we can and to engage in a collective process of bringing that wisdom to bear in our practice.

The books published by the National Assembly's publishing collective are also a part of this process. They are partially reflections (results) of this kind of intellectual engagement, but also partially tools (starter material) for *formación* workshops across the

National Assembly. These workshops are targeted at experienced members as well as for new ones; they are open to anyone who wants to learn more or spend time discussing a particular subject. Examples are workshops on capitalism and feminism, or even primers on the movement itself like the day-long workshop I attended in 2009. The teachers' plenary session described in Chapter 6 is an example of a *formación* workshop. In that sense, *formación* workshops are similar to study groups, but they are best conceived as a cross between a study group and a training workshop.

Activism and social change, then, are already conceived as founded on intellectual ideas and educational practices. Like the teachers' meetings, intellectual development as a *militante* is an assumed part of activism and is seen as fundamental, not merely supplementary. The National Assembly is an organization which struggles for basic material improvements like food, work, and shelter. The MTD Barracas has obtained funding for a soup kitchen and paid work positions in their cooperatives by blockading the streets and demanding concessions from the government. In the midst of what seem like more classic contentious politics, participation in the National Assembly begins with an orientation like that described in Chapter 3: examining the history of the movement and understanding the intellectual as well as material roots of its struggle.

Politicized Education

In the school, as I've shown, pedagogy is heavily influenced by Paolo Freire and subsequent theories of radical, critical, and popular education. Students are encouraged to

begin with their own lives, as concepts are grounded in the material realities of the students and their participation in the production of knowledge in the classroom. The first year natural sciences class, for example, used the body and the self as the year's focus instead of the more generic "biology." The language class culminated in the book project described in Chapter 4, where students simultaneously developed their grammatical skills and explored their own marginalization in a series of stories about their lives.

Originally published in 1968, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* is almost universally acknowledged as the central text on the topic of popular education. Freire developed his pedagogical theory as a Marxist working in landless peasant communities in Brazil under dictatorship, and was primarily focused on teaching literacy. The text is extremely well-known in neighboring Argentina, and its influence on the left across Latin America is immeasurable.

Freirean pedagogy has several basic tenets, contrasted, in Freire's terms with the "banking style" of education (banking is Freire's vivid description of traditional educational methods). 1) Knowledge is not something that can be had or encapsulated in facts that can be possessed but rather a living process. 2) This works best when the learner has the power to do a lot of the process for themselves. 3) Empowering the learner necessitates a democratic atmosphere in the classroom and 4) means that the teacher is not the expert giver of knowledge. 5) Knowledge and education are important insofar as they are relevant to students' lived experiences and 6) they are a primary means for the oppressed of achieving some power to change their own circumstances. This last point

about the oppressed is more than just a casual addition; in Freire's experience, the conditions of marginalization and oppression were a central aspect of why this education was critical, necessary, and more effective than other forms of education.

Popular education at the school is exemplified by a few different practices. One obvious one is the school's method of evaluation as discussed in Chapter 6. The evaluation is not only not quantitative, but also dialogic, in principle allowing the student equal authority in evaluating themselves. The evaluations also reflected the idea of learning as a process. A constant refrain in meetings where we discussed evaluation criteria, for example, was wondering whether each student-activist had "completed the process of the year."

Lesson content also often reflected the desire to encourage students to have the means to express themselves and to improve their ability to analyze their own circumstances. In each subject area, the goal was to design education relevant to the students actually in the classes rather than cover topics that were part of the curriculum for more abstract reasons. When we taught history in my own class, we discussed nation-state formation and we wanted students to use that to better understand Spanish colonialism and its legacies; their own indigenous heritage; and Latin America's post-colonial relationship with the United States. In the natural sciences, lessons were tied to taking care of one's own body, especially reproductive health. These lessons were signaled by at least one interviewee as extremely relevant given her own ignorance about pregnancy in adolescence. In language class tremendous emphasis was put on the

importance of telling our own stories and developing the ability to do so. The content of lessons was not only connected to students' relevant life experiences but also to relevant collective political action. This too is Freirean, and closely related to what he calls "*conscientización*."

"Dialogic Freedom"

The third part of my argument is that the combination of intellectual politics and politicized education implies a particular vision and *practice* of social change consonant with that outlined by Freire in a later work. Freire's *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998) argues that learning, understood as the production and construction of knowledge, is a basic aspect of humanity, since humans are subjects still in creation. For Freire, learning has implications far beyond the classroom; it is connected to the inherent essence of freedom, to a politics of hope and utopia, and essentially to our realization as human beings. Conversely, freedom is only meaningful when it is part of a constant reflection and reconstruction under a given set of historical and social circumstances. Education and knowledge production are necessarily central parts, then, of struggles for liberation.

This is a somewhat particular vision of social change. It begins with the condition of freedom and describes it as dialogic, dialectic, reflexive, and processual. That is, freedom is a situation—a set of circumstances that makes certain behaviors, engagements, and constructions possible. Liberation is not an endpoint but rather a condition of being. Popular education, then, can be seen clearly as a set of tools for

cultivating our own liberation. Not just via education, or as a step toward other forms of collective action, but the popular education classroom can strive to meet the conditions for freedom itself. Liberation is, at least partially, a condition of being. A person without the capacity for reflection and constant reconstruction—a “self-constituted revolutionary subject” as the National Assembly theorists call it—cannot be free. Thus, constantly creating such people is necessarily a move toward freedom. I will refer to this idea of social change and freedom as *dialogic freedom*.

It should be noted, however, that such freedom is inherently collective and the “self-constituted revolutionary subject” is self-constituted *within* a collective process. Freire’s work is explicitly about how the process of developing dialogic freedom is something that happens in a community setting, and even more specifically with the oppressed. Nor does dialogic freedom imply that freedom is untied from material conditions. Instead the idea here is that dialogic freedom is a necessary but insufficient condition for freedom, but, importantly, so is material well-being. Oppression is not limited to material effects like poverty and precarious housing, although it certainly includes that. Liberation requires both the material and the dialogic.

SOCIAL CHANGE AND UTOPIAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

So far in this chapter, I have described the National Assembly’s engagement in contentious politics and how that political activity is understood to be equally important as the everyday transformation of popular education and *formación*. The National

Assembly is a movement that includes *both* a *piquete* demanding increased subsidies and resources from the government *and* numerous workshops on *formación*. Up to now, the vast majority of the movements literature has treated these projects as disparate objects of analysis rather than one interlocking social change project. The *piquete*, in this case, conforms to contentious politics, while *formación* is about culture, identity, and subjectivity. Understanding the National Assembly and the people's high school as a utopian social movement contributes substantially to the existing sociological literature by allowing us to see the ways that material well-being and dialogic freedom are overlapping and intertwined goals, rather than competing variables or paradigms for analysis. In this case, the concept of *poder popular* is an articulation of the way that contentious politics, subjectivity, material well-being, and dialogic freedom are irrevocably interwoven into a broader utopian politics.

In Chapter 2 I argued that utopian social movements have four characteristics not well understood by the contentious politics paradigm:

- radical, uncompromising projects
- transforming social and community relationships
- community self-sufficiency
- social change occurs in the present

One of the key ways that utopian social movements violate existing views of movements in the literature is by mixing “cultural” and “political” goals. Furthermore, affect has oftentimes been treated as important in the sociology of social movements because it explains a significant part of the appeal of movement participation. This may be true, but

the contribution I hope to make here is to show that affect and the politics of social relationships are important to social change *in their own right*.

The radical, uncompromising nature of consensus and assembly are, I've argued, part of the creation of dialogic freedom. Similarly creating new social and community relationships, engendered in part by the radical nature of the project, contribute to the dialogic freedom that Freire describes. These new forms of relationships contribute to community self-sufficiency in tangible ways. Our ability to rely on one another in new (non-neoliberal) ways enables us to literally build our school together. Community self-sufficiency is about material provision for ourselves.

Each of these reinforces and is reinforced by the collective subject. Described in the previous chapter, the collective subject is at the heart of the utopian social movement project at the people's high school. The collective subject is emblematic of change in the present. We transform each other and are transformed via our participation as it happens.

The integration, then, between the material and the cultural is complete. Just as the (re)production of the collective subject requires structural and affective elements, so too the broader social change project entangles material and subjective notions of liberation. We ensure our material well-being through community, but community occurs in conditions of dialogic freedom.

SOCIAL CHANGE AT THE PEOPLE'S HIGH SCHOOL

Although some have argued that utopian social movements can only hope to

achieve modest transformation at the individual level, I assert that a significant degree of social change is happening at the people's high school. The school's political project successfully unites the material and dialogic conditions for freedom. *Compas* experience the collective subject and that experience is, in some sense, freedom. This is in stark contrast to the neoliberal project and the conditions in the *villa* I described in Chapter 4, and becomes something that is deeply transformative for those involved. But beyond the immediate experience, this experience of the power of the collective to solve problems becomes a touchstone experience that *compas* take with them outside the walls of the school, perhaps throughout their lives. And looking further, the school becomes an example of the possible for other people living under neoliberalism and looking for ways to resist (via, for example, this dissertation).

This chapter has shown how the multiple kinds of political engagement at the people's high school and the National Assembly are intentionally integrated and are actually all part of one coherent project. While the contentious politics paradigm⁶⁶ defines the political as only that which is aimed at the state (especially seeking material results), the broader vision of utopian politics at the people's high school shows that material contentious politics are inseparable from the cultural realm of dialogic freedom. *Poder popular* exemplifies this vision; subaltern subjectivity is engaged as a crucial aspect of the redistributive socialist project. Again, the subjective is inextricably linked with the material and political.

⁶⁶ This is equally true of much of the work on culture in social movements which responds to the contentious politics school.

If the school had merely succeeded in enrolling and matriculating students who had been shut out of the public educational system (primarily immigrants and women among the very poor), it wouldn't be the subject of this study. What makes the school important is precisely the fact that the school meets the conditions for creating a dialogic ideal of freedom *in addition to* improving the material lives of participant activists.

The school creates the intellectual capacity necessary for freedom, as well as the dialogic and participatory norms for this condition. On the other hand, the experiential practice and self-efficacy create the tools for material change and more tangible forms of community building. The material impact of the school goes beyond the diplomas, but all of it is enabled by the sense of efficacy and self-sufficiency produced within the collective subject.

Furthermore, the popular education practiced at the people's high school exemplifies the Freirean idea of social change described above, where education is a transformative process in itself, a process in which the student experiences liberation through the collective examination of their own life circumstances. The process is the liberation.

In other words, the people's high school matters. It matters in deep and important ways, some of which I know because my experience there mattered deeply to me. Like my interviewees, my experience as a *compañera* of the people's high school has shaped how I approach people, how I approach possible social movements, and how I approach my outlook on the world. Relying on the feminist ethnographic approach I

outlined in Chapter 1, I found myself as a researcher involved at the people's high school on a much more personal level. In an effort to center the feminist problematics I described earlier, I found myself increasingly examining my own emotional experiences during data analysis in an effort to clarify my own subjective positions. Using the self as the most potent research tool, I found that the school changed me, and, more to the point, it changed my perspective on what things are possible, how they are possible, and under what conditions. Like Crossley's (1999) example utopias, my own changed understanding of this possibility is itself social change in action.

At work in my claims about social change is my assumption that the social world is a complex organism, with multiple actors pushing in different and often contradictory directions. Social change is not something that happens uniformly or unidirectionally, but rather its impact is differential and it progresses unevenly in a nonlinear way. In fact, social change is constant. The world is always changing, and there are always many actors trying to change, control, or impact this change. So the question then becomes how a particular movement or actor engages in this change.⁶⁷ How does an actor—in this case the people's high school—interact with the complex and shifting terrain of the social organism?

I argued in Chapters 4 and 5 that the relevant status quo here is neoliberalism. The school is certainly making an intervention into the norms and “progressive change” of a neoliberal world. Instead of people becoming more responsible for themselves, they

⁶⁷ See Krausch and Hartmann (2014) for a more fully elaborated version of this claim.

are becoming more reliant on the communities around them. Nor are they trying to go back to “the way things were” or to get the state to do a better job of taking care of them, partly because they see the state as deeply implicated in a neoliberal project.

The school changes individuals, but it is also changing and creating community. It creates a community that is politicized and capable to confront a variety of issues and to solve a variety of problems. The school creates a foundation – a foundation of reflection, trust, respect, and belief in one’s own self efficacy. Beyond their immediate surroundings, these “knowing” communities are also portable and perhaps therefore more widely experienced.⁶⁸ The value of this kind of self-sufficiency, strongly associated with dignity, in a neoliberal society where the poor are marginalized for being poor, on top of their actual poverty,⁶⁹ is hard to overstate.

I argue that the characteristics of the collective subject—particularly those that make it utopian—make it something enduring that allow it to be mobilized for a variety of social struggles. The collective subject allows people to see how things are interconnected and creates a base from which people can recognize, solve and confront problems (just as Freire argued literacy programs could do). In this way the dynamism created by the non-hierarchical and consensus structures make the organization more flexible, versatile, and valuable in and of itself as social change. In Chapter 7 I quoted

⁶⁸ This portability is also a virtue in terms of resisting state control, as Zibechi (2010) highlights in his discussion on the importance of the dispersion of power in Bolivia. For him, if the tools and knowledge of the “new society” are more dispersed, they are therefore more widely used and understood.

⁶⁹ Recall the students’ example from Chapter 4 of not being able to get jobs because of their status as *villeros*.

Colectivo Situaciones (2002), who write that assemblies bring people “to be the protagonists their own destinies” (p. 166). The assembly is an experience of people taking control over their own lives. The reflection and the elements that create a collective subject allow people to take control over their own lives as part of a community (because as we know people are always embedded in social structures and contexts that cannot be impacted on an individual level). But the school creates the tools to form a supportive community: to start a soup kitchen when people are hungry, a school where people are illiterate, or a cooperative where people are out of work.

Epilogue

In 2013, two key events occurred at the people's high school. The first is that students from my 2011 social sciences class received their high school diplomas in December. The second is that the National Assembly split apart.

THE END OF THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY AS I KNEW IT

At a large national meeting in early 2013, the Assembly had been unable to agree on next directions for the organization. The particular issue at hand was how the National Assembly should face upcoming elections. Factions evolved out of differences which had been simmering for a while between constituent local groups, and eventually a majority of these groups decided to split ways from the National Assembly. The MTD Barracas stayed in the National Assembly, while a few other projects in Buenos Aires joined MTDs and other groups from around Argentina in leaving the National Assembly to form a new organization, the National Assembly Popular Wave.

I first learned officially about the division through an email from a friend as I was preparing for my return trip in June 2013. Marcela made sure to include some information about the split in an email exchange because she wanted to warn me ahead of time that I would probably not find the same organization I had left. I had some inkling that there were problems when I was there the previous year, as another *militante* friend told me that he expected such a split to happen in the next few years. I learned later that I was actually one of the few *compañerxs* to not be shocked by the news, at least at the

people's high school; other activists I spoke to after the fact said that they felt completely taken by surprise. I had also noticed some silences in my communications with activists over the last several months and in the movements' online presence, but had not been able to find many answers from afar. When I arrived in Buenos Aires the break-up of the National Assembly was still very recent and raw.

Nonetheless, I was surprised once I began speaking to people in person to find the extent to which this division was taken personally and the degree to which it had harmed personal relationships. I went to the school to visit with students and teachers, and this was the first time I had spoken to anyone in person about the division. Chatting in the kitchen with Miguel, I mentioned casually that I was planning on having a *mate* with Susana, another *compañera* teacher, the following day. I was shocked at Miguel's response; he expressed surprise and perhaps even disappointment that I would be in touch with her. He then informed me, almost confidentially, that she was one of those people who had left the National Assembly to form the National Assembly Popular Wave. Miguel was a *compañero* teacher whom I had always known to be extremely even tempered. But his tone changed immediately when the subject of the split came up, and he became a bit defensive and angry. Once he had raised the topic, I asked him what else he could tell me about what had happened within the National Assembly. I had never known Miguel to be deeply involved in the National Assembly beyond the level of the school, but he nonetheless described the split in a very personal way that demonstrated his strong identification with the MTD Barracas and the National Assembly. "They left

us,” he said, “and now we aren’t the strong national organization we were. How are we going to carry on our projects like this? We used to be a ton of people’s high schools, but now we’re only a small group.” Although Miguel was clearly angry about the breakup of the National Assembly, my strongest impression was that he was very, very hurt. He felt as though he, and the rest of the *compañerxs* at the school (and in the MTD and National Assembly beyond that), had been abandoned.

The following day when I went to visit Susana I got a different impression of what had happened, although she too sounded more hurt than angry about the turn of events. Susana was involved in another community project in Buenos Aires with several other former *compañero* teachers. Since this project (a community center, of sorts) was not part of the MTD Barracas, it made an independent decision and had left the National Assembly. Susana’s part of the story focused on how sad and daunting it was to be forming an organization from scratch. Her hurt stemmed from the shock of being seemingly forced back to the beginning; she felt as though they had lost everything they had worked so hard for over the years. Susana seemed more torn about her situation than another former teacher who had also left the school after the split participating in the same community center. Nonetheless, Susana felt that the other *compañerxs* (those who remained in the National Assembly) didn’t want to move forward with a truly national or even Latin American social change project. The National Assembly, she told me, never really defined what it stood for. “In the end, we didn’t have enough holding us together, so we just fell apart,” she said, sipping her *mate*.

Susana told me that she had tried to continue on at the school as a teacher, but that it had been too difficult. Other *militantes* told me similar stories, including some that seemed to have more or less left the movement altogether in an effort to avoid choosing sides and losing friends the way that Susana and Miguel had. Alicia, for example, seemed to be participating instead in other kinds of activism, like her workplace union. She still socialized with friends from the National Assembly, but I got the (unstated) sense that her choice was similar to Susana's—to choose the students and other *compañerxs* at the school or to choose the broader political project she believed in and go with the National Assembly Popular Wave. I myself did everything possible to avoid making such a decision by clinging to my foreignness as a white flag.⁷⁰

Peoples' analysis of the division of the National Assembly varied, of course. The first few people who told me about the split were *militantes* that hadn't been deeply involved in any day to day movement activities at the time and so their perspectives had been a bit more global and detached (while still hurt). Both were more involved at the national level, and so they had both been able to foresee, to some extent, the divisions that were deepening. But everyone else's descriptions sounded very much as if they felt they had had the rug pulled out from under them, although none of the students mentioned the split to me at all.

⁷⁰ To clarify, I am not implying that the National Assembly Popular Wave is also the political project that I believed more in, just that I had close friends on both sides and didn't really want to know how we might disagree.

Miguel told me that what had happened is that there was a group of people within the National Assembly who had decided that the best way to move forward was to participate in local elections. According to him, these people moved around the National Assembly having this discussion outside of open assemblies, trying to convince others of the rightness of their position. At a certain point, he said, “it was like the wave was uncovered.” Susana and others in the National Assembly Popular Wave, however, characterized the split as a necessity where so many *compañeros* were unwilling to consider developing their political strategies with the times. They argued that it was as if the (newly re-formulated) National Assembly just wanted to hide in their bunkers and never confront the contemporary political realities in Argentina. From their perspective, people weren’t interested in having an open conversation.

All stories are partial, and this one is no different. No *compañero* had a birds’ eye view of the whole story—the moment of the actual break, the complete history of the National Assembly up to that point, the varied motivations of each *compañero*, and that includes me. Even as a researcher, I can’t be everywhere at once. I don’t therefore purport to provide a comprehensive analysis of what happened, but rather some thoughts and reflections on the break-up of the National Assembly.

As I explained in Chapters 1 and 5, the National Assembly and many other Argentine utopian social movements had their genesis in the crisis of 2001. These movements were specifically born out of a rejection of all forms of politics and movements as usual, especially electoral politics. The National Assembly, until 2013, had

never officially run candidates for an election or endorsed any particular candidate. As part of the “independent left,” the movement found its role in challenging both “officialism” (in the form of Kirchnerism) and in challenging the traditional left (notably the socialist parties described by the National Assembly authors in the last chapter as “the crudest part of the left”). The split was not about whether the National Assembly should enter electoral politics. Actually, after the organization divided it was clear that both factions felt that the political project of the National Assembly would eventually involve the electoral arena. But the dividing factor did have to do with electoral politics, as suggested by Miguel. The pertinent questions weren’t whether to get involved, but how and when.

Another related partial explanation is that the two groups differed over how to confront Kirchnerism. It was obvious in the National Assembly that there were some contradictions. The organization was explicitly *antikirchnerista*, but on the other hand we all suspected that a majority of *compañeros* participated in Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s overwhelming 2011 presidential victory.⁷¹ In some ways, this is the picture of the left in Argentina in these years writ small (I explain in more detail below). The dilemma, then, was when and how forcefully to confront the *kirchnerista* project. To be clear, the National Assembly had been confronting Kirchnerism all along. The road block described in the Conclusion, for example, was an explicitly *antikirchnerista* action. But as Kirchnerism continued to increase its political power, the question of how strongly to

⁷¹ Kirchner received 54.11% of the popular vote, while the second most popular candidate, Hermes Binner, came in with only 16.81%.

contest it became more urgent. According to some *compañeros*, those who remained in the National Assembly didn't feel the time was right to really confront Kirchnerism because they didn't think they would win. Instead, they wanted to wait and see how national politics would develop before expanding the political project. In the meantime (at least according to their opponents), they were more interested in simply trying to maintain the neighborhood-based projects (like the people's high school).

Some of the break had to do, however, with less instrumental political questions. When I visited the school in 2013, another *militante* told me that the bright side of the division was that in the new National Assembly it was easier for everyone to trust one another. Consistent with the description given by Miguel, this *militante* teacher told me that while the division was obviously sad and regrettable, it was good that the conflict was brought out into the open. This *militante* claimed that the relationships within the National Assembly were much better now that the other group had left, essentially implying that the movement was better off without the sneaky activists who had subverted the open, consensus-based process.

Comparing these stories, I see support emerging for an alternate explanation I heard, one that is about the difficulty of maintaining a cross-class alliance in a revolutionary organization. The National Assembly, as I described in Chapter 1, included students and employed workers as well as MTDs, but as I described in the Conclusion, was deeply identified with the popular classes. Of course there is a long history within communist-socialist organizing of tension that stems from the place of the middle class

(e.g., students, professionals, and especially intellectuals) within a revolutionary movement of the masses. This tension was occasionally visible at the people's high school, especially in the disconnect between the school and the surrounding MTD (which was after all, a movement of unemployed workers). The teachers at the high school, as I've stated earlier, were almost necessarily middle class: they had secondary school diplomas. Although there were a few exceptions (teachers who had themselves graduated from a people's high school, and teachers who had diplomas but remained very close to working class or poor roots), our location as a group within an MTD was at times awkward. There were a few murmurs on the part of *compañerxs* from other parts of the MTD about their wariness of the middle class teachers, and a few signs of minor exclusion of teachers from real decision-making power beyond the MTD. This is not to say that there were no teachers who were involved in the MTD beyond the school; on the contrary, there were several *compañero* teachers who were well known *militantes* in the MTD and in the National Assembly. These teachers, however, had universally adopted a working class habitus which might have been a prerequisite for their acceptance in such spaces, and in a few short conversations it seemed to me that some of them felt their participation as a group was sometimes suspect.⁷² At least one person confided in me that a factor in the split was the fact that the National Assembly had not been sure how to maintain workers' hegemony over an organization that was increasingly composed of students and professionals (as well as unemployed workers). This fear, this activist said,

⁷² On the other hand, some of this suspicion seemed to be coming from "holier than the Pope" activists who were themselves from middle class origins.

led to some bad decisions and in particular to the conservatism I described above in terms of confronting Kirchnerism. It seems possible that this tension led to (intentional or unintentional) silencing of certain *compañeros* and certain viewpoints which could have then lead to the secrecy described by Miguel.

Organizational splits and infighting on the left have historically seemed really petty (a classic example here is the People's Front of Judea and Judean People's Front from the film *Life of Brian*). Even though I don't know to what extent the disagreement was emotional, I have shown in the previous chapters that the emotional attachment to the movement and the *compañeros* in it are anything but petty or incidental. They are in fact a substantial part of the movement, so it follows that emotional disagreements would actually be perfectly reasonable grounds on which to split the organization. It is tempting, in other words, to see the split as another unfortunate example of the tendency of the left to devour itself, but I think it is important to recognize the validity of the hurt feelings involved as I have similarly recognized the validity and importance of the positive feelings *compañeros* get from their participation in the movement.

The reasons for the division of the National Assembly I give here are fairly speculative. It is clear, however, that the changing national political context in Argentina was more than a little responsible for pushing all of this to the crisis point. These organizational difficulties arose and became insurmountable within the context of Latin America's "Pink Tide" and specifically in Argentina, during the consolidation of Kirchnerism.

In the early 2000s, Latin America experienced a “Pink Tide” as a series of democratic socialist-leaning governments came to elected power throughout the region. These leaders came to power in tandem with powerful social movements who either directly supported their candidacies or who were powerful enough at the time to wield significant electoral and rhetorical power throughout the campaigns. While these governments certainly represent some degree of anti-imperialist victory in a region that has long been politically controlled by leaders handpicked by the United States, their ascension to the seat of state power has nonetheless presented obstacles for movements espousing radical social change. In most instances, radical social change has not ensued, yet movements have lost many of their most obvious grounds for contention as they have a “friend” in power. In other words, things are still bad for many people, they are just not as bad as they were (and for fewer people), which makes movement recruitment more difficult.

Kirchnerism in particular has had a complex relationship with movements in Argentina. In one respect, the Kirchner governments have legitimately been beholden to the social movements for their rise to power, since no national government in 2003 would have been able to maintain power in the face of adamant movement opposition.⁷³ *Kirchnerista* policies have also often been genuinely more favorable to the post-2001 movements’ ultimate goals than have been previous anti-Peronist administrations; significant increases in social welfare plans, public housing projects, and other forms of

⁷³ It’s worth pointing out here the relative weakness of the Argentine state more generally, too.

social development have increased the size of the welfare state and strengthened the social safety net. These are, no doubt, good things. The Kirchnerist project has done all this in tandem, however, with a targeted effort to co-opt the post-2001 *piquetero* movements by mimicking previous eras of clientelism. While many things are better than they were in 2003, Kirchnerism is hardly a reflection of the *poder popular* the National Assembly strives for. Yet, recruitment becomes harder as the Kirchner political machine seeks loyalty in the same neighborhoods where the National Assembly is based. Many former MTDs around Argentina have formally affiliated with the Kirchnerist political party, Frente para la Victoria, and the FPV has a secondary school completion project of its own that it has recently begun unveiling. But the Kirchner projects take shortcuts from the movement projects they imitate; the Kirchnerista secondary school completion project does not take into account how students have “accompanied the process of the year,” nor does it create a collective subject or the conditions for dialogic freedom. Nonetheless, even as Kirchnerism seems to increasingly need opponents on the left to keep it honest, the massive popularity of *kirchnerista* projects make *antikirchnerista* recruitment difficult. Resisting cooptation in the face of concessions by the state is difficult for any movement. So far the National Assembly has been able to do it, becoming neither *kirchnerista* nor *antiperonista*. Only when faced with this difficult political context did the National Assembly fracture.

THE MEANING OF THE PEOPLE’S HIGH SCHOOL: GRADUATION 2013 AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF UTOPIA

It’s difficult for me to draw meaning out of a sad event like the National Assembly’s fracture. I, too, was disappointed by my *compañeros*’ behavior toward each other, and since I had missed the actual conflict, I was no longer really sure where my sympathies lay. The split was, for me, an almost whiplash-like reminder that no movement, including the school, is a generalizable model, but is always contextually and historically contingent. The school existed in 2011 as a space within a particular political moment in Argentina. As of this writing the school continues to exist, but the sustainability and stability of its model is far more in question than it seemed in 2011. But then, nothing lasts forever, not even utopia. Even less so a “processual” utopia like this one. I have hesitated all along to argue that this is a long term or directly replicable model, and the fracture in the National Assembly seems to be the proof that it is not.

What remains clear is that the people’s high school changed dozens of lives in 2011 (and perhaps hundreds in total). On my return trip in 2013 I found the organization suffering, but I also found many of my previous students thriving. Although there were no huge surprises about who had made it to their graduating semester, students who had once been timid, unsure of the way things worked at the school, and unsure of what the movement was about, now constituted the senior class. They had their own radio program and were more confident than ever.

This group included Josefina, who had maintained her steady attendance at the school despite her tough end of the year evaluation where we admonished her to show more commitment and *compañerismo*. Also graduating was her extremely quiet sister Sara, and their third sister, Ana. I didn't manage to get there at the beginning of class, but I imagine that the three of them were still arriving first and setting up their own table just as I described in Chapter 3 (although it seems possible that they were by this time taking a more active role in setting up *all* the tables). Although Ana had been so enthusiastic in her first year about the *compañerismo* at the school (as I described in Chapter 2) and her involvement in the school seemed like such a change, as we described in her end of the year evaluation (reproduced in Chapter 6), Ana was not any more involved in the movement beyond the school than she had been at the end of the first year. I suspect that she still didn't see herself as someone who would be involved in politics (as she told me in her interview in 2011). Perhaps this is not as disappointing as it at first seems to me and other *militantes*. Perhaps, although I'm not sure about this, Ana and other students' ability to remain steadfastly committed to the school and its ways of interacting without ever fully (consciously) committing to the more obviously political project at the school is a positive aspect of the utopian model of social change. What I mean is that when I interviewed Ana she was very clear that she agreed with "the movement's" goals and tactics, but she did not see herself as part of them. (In her mind "the movement" was separated from the school, as I described in the Conclusion.) Like many other people, she didn't see herself as one to go out into the streets blocking traffic and claiming her rights

to dignified housing, schooling, and work.⁷⁴ She did however support those who *did* see themselves that way, and wasn't ashamed to be involved in a movement that engaged in such activity. It is interesting, and perhaps extremely positive, that the school provided a way for Ana (and other graduating students) to see themselves as *compañerxs* of the school, to perhaps move to a position of support for the more explicitly contentious political project *without* having to confront an idea of themselves as participants in it. In other words, Ana was participating in the social movement, very actively, without forming what would seem like the requisite activist identity. One could imagine that the ability for people to participate in challenging neoliberalism (and especially its effects on themselves) without having to form an activist identity as such is a very positive thing indeed.

Andrés also graduated in 2013. In fact, Andrés, who told me the story of his life framed by his suffering, is one of the happiest success stories of the school. After telling Romina and I that he was planning on returning to Paraguay at the end of 2011, he ended up returning to the *villa* and to the school and sticking it out for the following two years. Andrés is currently enrolled in a university program in foreign languages. Raquel who always arrived late also graduated. This was the most surprising of the group, because despite Raquel's often enthusiastic embrace of subject matter in the classroom, she always seemed to be more interested in the personal dramas of the relationships between

⁷⁴ This is a crucial difference between the word activist in English and the way *compañero* was used at the school. *Compañero* doesn't necessarily carry the connotation of being willing to march or picket the way activist does.

the *compañerx* students. Nonetheless, there she was in May 2013, fun loving and boisterous as always, ready to graduate that December (which she did). Rosa, who had never been to a movie theater (like perhaps many of the students), also graduated smoothly.

Finally there was Juana. Although she was still living in the *villa* two years after telling me how desperately she wanted to escape it (recounted in Chapter 4), she successfully obtained her high school diploma. In the intervening years her daughter had been ill and had not herself managed to stay in high school, but Juana had not lost hope. And it seemed to me that the school had been in large part responsible for that. In her interview, Juana told me how much she regretted not fighting more for her son as a sick child, and really not fighting more for herself either. She also told me how much she appreciated that all the teachers (and eventually everyone) at the school greeted her and asked her how she was. The school was a place where Juana felt valued, but I think she felt especially visible and capable, and it seemed to me that this feeling fortified her. It helped her withstand the indignities and painful realities of her life in the *villa*.

Within the school, students from the neighboring *villa* were able to sit and have *mate* at peace with their children and neighbors, with none of the fear of violence that seemed pervasive in their home lives. Sitting with Juana in her house she seemed a bit tense and on edge. The shadow of the men standing just outside the door, the threat of thugs coming in to take over her house, and the smell of the river all pervaded the inside of her rented room. They weren't just outside; even at home, these fears and lack of

security came in. At Gladys' place, the children cried piled nearly on top of each other, the landlords came and went, and the sounds of construction rang out permanently. In eleven months of being at the school several times a week, I never once saw an act of violence. Not between *compañerxs*, not between a *compañerx* and someone coming in off the street.⁷⁵

The school was more than a haven from the storm of neoliberalism raging in the *villa* outside. It was a haven that we ourselves constructed and maintained. It wasn't a shelter or other space provided for *villerxs* by well-intentioned outsiders as an escape. It was a space that, in stark contrast to all the norms of competition, disconnection, and violence, *villerxs* constructed for themselves (literally as well as metaphorically). The school denaturalized the competition, scarcity, patriarchy, and individualism which neoliberalism requires to thrive.

Of the original twenty-two students, nine graduated in December 2013. They were joined by nine other classmates who joined their class in the following years.

Returning to my questions from Chapter 1, I can now definitively say that the subaltern can make decisions collectively. This dissertation is, perhaps first and foremost, an example of how this has happened and continues to happen. For me, the most important part of this is that I've shown that it matters deeply how we treat one another within movement projects and why. This is not only about being nice and kind to others;

⁷⁵ Family violence was unfortunately present and even sometimes cast a long shadow but at least inside the school neither hands nor voices were ever raised.

our liberation is bound up with the way we interact with one another. Without changing social relationships and without conscious efforts at mutual respect and care, there is no dialogic freedom and there is no liberation. The fabric of the movement—the social web of relations and especially affect that hold us together and bind us to one another—is as essential as the instrumental outcomes of protest or contentious politics.

Utopia is, as Gordon (2004) says, the essence of social movement itself. It is the dream of a better world put into practice, and in that practice it becomes reality (even if it is sometimes a momentary reality). The importance of this dream is fundamental to the pursuit of liberation. Utopian social movements needn't eschew instrumental, material, or contentious political tactics and goals. Utopia with inadequate food and shelter is an oxymoron. But nor can adequate food and shelter be enough on their own. We must also practice and experience the condition of being that is freedom.

Utopia, as I said in Chapter 2, is important as an inspiring example, as a testing ground for ideas, and as an exercise in thinking like the free people that we wish to become. I have chosen to examine the experience of the people's high school largely in the spirit of inspiration. I hope that by understanding more about the practices and projects of the people's high school and the MTD Barracas others will be inspired to experiment in their own far-flung communities. The alternative is to accept the status quo.

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Glossary of Spanish-language Words

bachillerato – In Argentina this term refers to secondary education and especially the diploma you earn at the end of it (U.S. equivalent of a high school diploma). It is more often used in reference to schools attended by adults than to the secondary schools kids attend after primary school. In addition to *bachilleratos populares*, there are also *bachilleratos privados* which are privately run schools.

compa – Gender neutral, slang short-hand for *compañero/a*.

compañero/a – Comrade, companion, buddy, compatriot, or almost any English word that can end in –mate. Often translated as comrade, but this term doesn't always have a political connotation nor does it have any socialist connotation (actually *camarada* would be the strict equivalent of comrade). Nor does it always imply a particularly close social relationship. People refer to their *compañeros* from school for example, but on the other hand it is also the equivalent of the way people in the U.S. use “partner” to refer to their romantic significant others. In political circles it implies something like “comrade in the struggle.”

compañerismo – Harmony between *compañeros* and especially a minimum level of solidarity, respect, and mutual care between activists but not necessarily friendship or affection.

concientización – Consciousness raising, as described by Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

formación – A kind of education that is a cross between study and training; “formation.” Often used in conjunction with workshops held by and for activists on particular topics, it is seen as an important component of activism. I describe the use of *formación* in the MTD Barracas more specifically in the Conclusion.

mate (or *yerba mate*) - *Yerba mate* is a hot drink consumed in Argentina on a daily basis or more. The *yerba* is akin to a dry tea, which is placed inside a gourd or wooden cup (the *mate*), along with a metal filtered straw (*bombilla*). Sugar may or may not be added. The person preparing the drink then fills the cup with boiling water. Beginning with the server, each person drains the cup of water on their turn and passes it back to the server to be refilled when they are finished. The server then pours in more water and passes it to the next person in the group. The drink is almost always shared and is an important social ritual in Argentine life. People drink it in the morning, at tea time, on outings, and at various kinds of meetings, among other times. Although it is also consumed in Uruguay, Paraguay, and parts

of Bolivia and Brazil, some aspects of the preparation are different in each place and so considerable national identity is involved.

mesa – Literally means table but is also used by the Zapatistas and others to mean a coordinating body or assembly. Here it refers to the MTD Barracas’ coordinating body, attended by activists working on all of the MTD’s different projects who met regularly for an assembly.

militante – Another term that has no direct equivalent. It means something more than “activist” by implying more commitment and passion. In interviews, people gave it a strong connotation of martyrdom and used Che Guevara as a reference point. It was also used regularly at the people’s high school to refer to those participants who seemed to be more involved with the movement. At the school, a *militante* was usually someone who had been involved for more than one school year and who was involved in other MTD or National Assembly activities beyond the school.

mística – In generic Spanish, the word means mystical or mystique. Defined and analyzed in more detail in Chapter 7, where I explain that in political spaces in Latin America and specifically at the People’s High School it takes on a more targeted meaning referring to the positive energy and excitement that comes from activism.

MTD (movimiento de trabajadores/as/xs desocupados/as/xs) – Unemployed workers’ movement, a common organizational form that arose in the late 1990s, described in Chapter 5.

piquete – A roadblock of the kind popularized in the late 1990s, described in Chapter 5.

piquetero/a/x – Sometimes translated as *picketer*, this term literally describes the people participating in the roadblocks. It became a wider form of identity, embraced by many groups and activists, and associated with poor people and unemployed workers, especially those participating in MTDs.

poder popular – Popular power or people power, but not the same as populism (*populismo*). This term is part of the political slogans of the National Assembly and is unpacked in more detail in the Conclusion.

popular – Popular in the classic sense of “of the masses” (rather than the more common contemporary meaning of “well-liked”). I have translated it as “people’s” in some cases and as “popular” in others where I felt the meaning was clear.

referente – Example or model activist; role model. This term is sometimes interchangeable with *militante* but as I explain in Chapter 7 usually has the connotation of a movement elder.

villa miseria (or just *villa*) – The common term in Buenos Aires for shantytown (literally misery village). The older and more official term is a *villa de emergencia* (emergency village).

villero/a/x – Resident of a *villa*.

~xs (as in *compañerxs* or *trabajadorxs*) – This is a gender neutral suffix used increasingly by activists. In Spanish, plural nouns referring to men end in *-os* (with some exceptions) and those referring to women end in *-as*. A mixed-gender group is traditionally referred to with the masculine suffix (even if the group consists of 50 women and 1 man). To avoid the erasure of women and the consideration of men as the neutral subject, activists use *-xs*, *-@s*, or *-os/as* in written communication. (It is much harder to do, and also much less consistently done, in spoken communication.) Since the *-xs* variation is most common in Buenos Aires, I have used it here.